



FRACTURED
Wings

M.T. MORGAN

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Fractured Wings

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*TO THOSE WITH FRACTURED WINGS,
I HOPE YOU LEARN TO FLY AGAIN.
TO MY HUSBAND AND CHILDREN FOR FIXING MINE
AND TEACHING ME TO FLY.*

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About the Author

Also by M.T. Morgan

“There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”

– Leonard Cohen

Dear Reader,

I broke a thousand laws and dramatized the story to fit the nature of my view. I did extensive research and tried my best to paint a vision of an enthralling story. However, **this is a work of fiction**—so, no, everything will not be done as some would prefer.

This story is **DARK**. Not gray, but black. The **themes** of this book are **heavy**. They are **upsetting** and extremely **uncomfortable**. Even for me, and I wrote it. On the next page you will find a list of **trigger warnings**. I trust you know yourself well enough to know whether you want to skip that page. But even if you think you should skip it, I urge you to read them anyway.

And if you find that you are experiencing the triggers in your life, I urge you to call the hotlines I have provided to help you out of that darkness.

And if you make it past them and decide to read *Fractured Wings*, I hope you enjoy the ride.

XOXO, MT

Warning

This book contains subject matters some may find triggering.

This story includes:

Child abuse

Murder

Violence

Mental illness

Kidnapping

Graphic scenes

Talk of suicide

Mention of rape

Due to that, this story is not for everyone. Please take that into consideration before reading this book. Your mental health is IMPORTANT to ME.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-7233

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: 988

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673

Playlist

bury a friend – Billie Eilish

MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT – Loveless

Paradise – Coldplay

Sweater Weather – The Neighbourhood

Silence – Marshmello ft. Khalid

Mad Hatter – Melanie Martinez

Born to Die – Lana Del Rey

Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God) – Loveless

scare myself – Nessa Barrett

Power Over Me – Dermot Kennedy

lovely – Billie Eilish & Khalid

Wicked Games – The Weeknd

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2WhvXVKzmnhXrFRWBGl
dKf?si=a757ba6437244534](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2WhvXVKzmnhXrFRWBGl
dKf?si=a757ba6437244534)

Prologue



Past

Sometimes I get this feeling, a knot deep in my gut, curdling like old milk. A warning, maybe. But anytime I felt it, I knew something wasn't right.

Like the floor beneath me, it feels slick, not hard and cold like what I'm used to. The noises around me are loud, people shouting in all directions. The only sound I ever hear is the hum of my sister's voice, and if not that, it's the whimpers of her pain. Or it's their voices, rough and cold, demanding and sinister.

I know, even before my eyes flicker open, the light burning my pupils instead of the darkness I'm used to, that something is not right.

“Girl, you need to get up.” The voice is new, a soft melody compared to the loud screeches of everyone else.

My eyes flick open, taking in the towering body over mine. His hair is auburn, mustache like a caterpillar engulfing his top lip. His bushy brows are furrowed over light honeycomb eyes. I recognize the uniform. All black, complete with a shiny badge. “Girl,” he repeats. “You need to get up.”

I blink my eyes at him, trying to adjust to the harsh lighting. My face is crushed against the dingy linoleum I’ve only ever seen a handful of times. What was once white is now yellowed with nicotine and years of neglect.

I push my hands under my body, rising to a sitting position. The officer crouches in front of me, eyes taking in the ratted green dress hanging loosely to my skin-and-bones body. “What’s your name?” he asks.

I look to my hands, digging into my mind to remember. “They call me One, but I think my name is Starlette.”

He nods, the movement causing my eyes to snag on to the bodies not far from me. I chew on my lip, studying the torn flesh of one, the eyes missing from the other. I know I should throw up, scream, do anything besides look, but I can’t stop. I can’t stop the feeling of relief that washes over me.

My eyes track around the room, skipping over officers and people in white coats, the flash of cameras and the tape around the bodies, searching for Sienna. “We’re going to have to take you in for questioning.” I nod, my eyes flashing back to the honey of his. “Can I ask what happened here?”

Where is my sister?

I peer around again. “What do you mean?” I reply, scanning the room thoroughly.

He clears his throat. “At this home. How did you get here? Who killed these people?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

How did I end up here? I’m not allowed to leave our room, and yet, I’m somehow in the kitchen. My mind blurs, the world

spinning as something heavy inside of my chest tightens. I feel a little frantic on the inside, confused and lost.

“Where is my sister?” I ask.

The man frowns. “I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me before I can answer any of your questions.”

My ears buzz, mind slipping further as I rise. Everything feels off, nothing makes sense. I question myself... Have I finally snapped?

From that point on, the knotting, curdling feeling never goes away.

Chapter 1



I HATE LIFE.

That's not an exaggeration, or a cry for help. The truth is, I am surviving, not living. Living hints at some form of purpose. I don't really have one. Other than not letting the past repeat itself.

"Fuck," I mutter as I walk up the sidewalk to Mountain View Psychological Hospital. The light beige brick is stacked high, archways in all directions, as if they were afraid no one would see them. The conical roof gives this place the illusion that it was once a castle. This is going to be my home and place of work for the next two years. At least, that's what the contract said that I just signed.

Psychiatrist to the lost souls who dwell here.

Irony is a funny thing, isn't it? A twisted, little sick joke. I, the moodiest bastard to ever walk the earth, help people.

I open the door as a woman walks out. Her hair is a mess, dark blonde waves curling and flying in all directions, eyes wild with something dark lurking in them. She blinks and it's as if that tiny glimpse of the sinister look I just saw never happened. Her full lips curve, revealing sharp, white teeth my sick mind wouldn't mind having sink into my neck. Freckles dancing across her nose that she scrunches slightly. She looks young, but not super young. Maybe mid-twenties. Gun-metal eyes twinkling as she notice me assess her.

This really isn't the time for my cock, the picky bastard, to decide to come alive.

I glare down at her, waiting for her to move the fuck on so I can get to my office. Instead, to my displeasure, she sticks out her hand. My eyes snap to it then back to hers. She frowns, her pretty little mouth turning down at the corners, which has mine twitching. "You must be new. I visit my brother here every week and have never seen you." Her voice is raspy and sweet, curling around my soul in a vise-like grip that has my cock straining against my slacks.

The fuck is wrong with me?

Instead of answering her question, I brush her aside. Stomping inside the building like the place pissed me off. It had, if I am being honest. The smell is peculiar, a mixture of stress sweat and bleach. The smell is always the first thing I notice about a new place, or a new person. Like that creature I just brushed away—roses.

Tile that was once white is stained a dingy yellow, chipped in some places. The walls are full of posters and inspirational quotes. Like that's going to fucking help these people. State-owned hospitals rarely know what they are doing. There's a check-in counter, and two-way mirrors overlooking the patients as they sit, eyes zoned out as they are looking at the TV in the rec room. My loafers slap against the tile as I make my way down the main hallway, turning right at the end and heading to the last door on the right.

Just as I walk into my office, alarms begin to blare. The hallways flash red as I see nurses in sterile white uniforms run around as if their heads have been chopped off and using common sense is beyond them.

A man stops in front of my door, hazel eyes wide with anxiety as he sputters, “Have you seen—”

He’s cut off with a push of my hand against my door, the loud bang of it snapping against the hinges his answer.

I don’t fucking care. Not my problem. Especially not at seven o’clock in the morning before the depths of my black coffee has stained my lifeless soul.



I USE MY BLACK SHARPIE TO DRAW LINES THROUGH THE NAMES of my patients I’ve seen today.

Elena, age twenty, schizophrenia.

Andrew, age forty-five, borderline personality disorder.

Sue, age thirty-three, depression.

Like calls to like, that’s what they say, and maybe there is some truth behind it. Otherwise, I would have chosen another profession.

I’ve always liked the darkness, the terrors that go bump in the night. They don’t frighten me; I embrace them. Stare them in the face until I’m victorious.

There is a knock on my door, and I sigh as I toss my Sharpie down. Hands bracing behind my neck, I call, “What?”

The door swings open and in she walks. Black sweats hiding every inch and curve I remember from my first day. Slumping into the chair across from me, her eyes meet mine. Dead. Cold. Assessing.

Disapproving.

A slow smirk spreads across her lips as her eyes become lively. A challenge. As if maybe, I might be her pray.

Starlette Fawn. Age twenty-five, psychopath.

They found her yesterday, passed out by a pond on the outskirts of town. She claims she had no clue how she got there, no memory of escaping, but no one believes her, because psychopaths lie. And she's a master at it.

My first day here, when I bumped into her and she mentioned a nonexistent brother, she was escaping. She was so convincing, even though I was in no mood to listen or care. Imagine this small woman was the cause of all the chaos that day.

I watch her closely as she watches me back, her eyes dancing, then the light dies out and there is nothing in them but a void of nothingness and a hint of sadness. Too bad for her, I'm trained to not fall for that shit.

"Scarlett, so nice of you to arrive fifteen minutes late."

She frowns, brushing her matted hair behind her ears. "It's Starlette."

I rest my head on top of my steepled hands. "If you do not respect my time, why should I care if I've gotten your name right or wrong?"

She nibbles on her lip, a show of apprehension. I stand, grabbing her file. She wasn't fooling me as she had done to her past doctors. I sit in front of her, slapping her thick manila folder against my thigh. "Let's go over your crimes, shall we? No need to take the time to get to know one another since neither of us respects the other."

"Alleged," she whispers, looking to the floor. Her tucks her knees under her chin as she messes with the grip on the bottom of her socks.

I purse my lips. "Alleged crimes."

I set down a picture of a middle-aged woman. Intestines spilling from her stomach.

She looks down, studying it, before her eyes sweep back to mine. No emotion. A black void.

"How did you feel when committing this crime?"

“Since I didn’t, I don’t know how I’d feel committing this crime.” She looks back down at it, fingers tracing her toes beneath her socks, cocking her head to the side to take the picture in from all angles. “But if I had to guess, I’d say pleasure. A euphoric feeling washing over me as the knife penetrated again. And again. Blood rushing fast through my body, the sight curing the hunger.”

I stare at her, a little stunned at her answer. I’ve had many patients, ranging from all disorders, but none quite this beautiful, this violent.

I slip another picture out. The man’s eyes carved from his skull, his appendage crammed in his mouth. “And this one?” I ask.

She grabs the picture, bringing it closer to her face. “Do you ever wonder why people make a mockery of dead bodies after taking their lives?”

I shake my head. “No, I’ve never thought about it.”

She hums, setting the photo back down, eyes connecting with mine once again. “I have. I think when evil is allowed to walk the earth, make mockery of the living, they meet their match. Therefore, making them a target of their own vicious ways. Hence why this man is eating his dick.”

The clock ticks in the background, the only noise following a statement I can neither agree nor disagree with. “So, you’re admitting to doing this?”

She purses her lips. “I do not believe I said anything of the sort, do you, Doctor Novak?”

My eyes narrow, reflecting back at me in her sparkling gray-blues. The buzzer goes off, her eyes swinging over to it. “Seems like our time is up. Maybe next time I won’t get lost on my way here and *disrespect* your time.”

Liar. She was born and bred to play tricks on my mind. To see me as a challenge and nothing less. She’s going to be upset when she realizes I’m going to play with her mind too.

Starlette stands, walking to my door, throwing a look over her shoulder, and says, “And, Doctor Novak?”

“What?” My voice is a low warning.

“You’re wasting your time. With me, that is.”

She looks away, opening the door and walking out. I pick the pictures up, examining the harsh reality of who and what I just had sitting less than five feet away from me.

Yeah, we’ll see about that, Starlette Fawn.

Chapter 2



IT'S NOT hard to notice the stares, even when I look to the ground. To feel the hard sting of judgment that radiates from their pores as I walk past them. They all think I'm insane, a liar, and maybe I am both. Just not in the way they think. The diagnosis is bullshit. I know what I allegedly did is wrong, but does anyone ever stop and ask the villain why they did those things to begin with? No.

I've lost count of how long I've been here. The thing is, I'm not going to let Doctor Novak, you, or even myself, get into my mind. So here I will stay, probably forever.

I look at my cards, the frigid air of the rec room seeping through the thin, scratchy material of my sweatpants. Sighing at the hand I have, I slap my cards down. I push my favorite bag of chips across the table to Elena. Honestly, this isn't a

real card game, something Elena made up in that fun mind of hers, but it makes her happy. So, I play every day, not even complaining when the rules change sporadically.

Elena grins, fanning her cards between her thin hands as she whispers to something or someone beside her shoulder. They also think she's crazy, but with how much she wins at this game, I'm starting to think whatever she's talking to is cheating for her.

Elena is younger than me. At the tender age of twenty, she, too, was forced to rot here. Short black hair that sticks out, whipping every which way. Cracked lips that blend in with her pale complexion. Her eyes are lively, a wild brown so dark they're almost black. She smiles at me, chapped lips peeling back, the skin tearing her mouth is so dry. "You lose, again." She bounces excitedly.

"Yes," I nod, "I've lost again for the fifth time this week, Elena." I cross my arms, falling slack in my chair as I peer around.

Mountain View Psych Hospital. They should call it Mountain View Prison. The paint on the walls haven't been updated since the early eighties. The tile is broken in places, yellowed from neglect and nicotine abuse, yet they haven't allowed smoking indoors since 1997. The rules are overbearing, except for the dress code. As in, there isn't one. Which is nice, I guess. We are allowed to take trips outside the cage if our family agrees and comes to get us. I always decline because I simply have no desire to see the outside world.

A man walks by, scratching at his arms as he paces around the room, causing Elena's anxiety to rise. "Elena..." I warn.

Her jaw tics, lips murmuring words at a rapid pace as she watches the man. She freezes, and I grab my chips and scoot my chair back. Far away that when she flips the table it won't land on me.

Elena has triggers, and the man currently walking suspiciously is one of them. She's never told me why she has triggers and I have never disclosed mine either. Most people stay away from Elena. I, on the other hand, am one of the very

few who like her—though she has terrible dad jokes, she always has great snacks.

Today is an off day for her. She's not always like this.

She suddenly screeches, flinging her chair back, hands clutched on the ends of the table before it flips over, cards scattering across the floor.

Nurses run in, frantic eyes searching for the source of the disruption, exasperation coating their expressions when they see it's Elena. Yet again.

"Be gentle," I gasp as they toss her to the floor, straddling her.

"Shut it, Fawn. You can be next, if you want."

I stand, tossing my bag of chips over to Freddie. He claps after catching them.

"No, I'm not going to shut it. She is a person, or have you forgotten that fact?"

The nurse's eyes latch on to mine, a sinister smile curving across his chunky face. "Starlette. Starlette. Starlette." He begins to walk toward me, so I spit on his shoes. The smirk drops, eyes hardening as he reaches for me.

Everyone has triggers, and one of mine is things said or done in threes.

Exhaustion takes over my body, something dark and smoky creeping up within my soul. He touches my wrist, nails digging in.

And then, it all fades to black



MY EYES FLUTTER OPEN, TAKING IN MY SURROUNDINGS: THE padded room, plastic handcuffs cutting into my ankles and wrists, the single bulb hanging from the ceiling. My face is smooshed against the padded floor. I wiggle myself until I face the floor-to-ceiling glass wall. A tall man with dark hair and

crisp, mossy green eyes rests his hands against it. Watching me. His chiseled jaw is covered in a dark stubble.

Doctor Novak.

I raise both eyebrows at him. His posture stays stiff, unmoving. Eyes tracking the wiggle of my toes, the stretch of my fingers. Nurse Mick sidles up beside him, a dark smile on his lips as he looks to me. I maneuver my hands so he can see me flip him off. Mick the Dick presses the intercom button. “Not so tough now that you’re locked up, are you, girl?”

I notice his split lip, scratches on his face. “Girlfriend get sick of your shit, Mick the Dick?” I grin when his face turns red, metaphorical steam billowing from his ears.

“You little—”

“That’s enough.” Doctor Novak’s bored tone cuts him off.

“But she always does this. She pretends she doesn’t remember attacking us, but she does! That little bitch remembers *everything*.”

Novak the Quack frowns. Yeah, childish to give everyone rhyming nicknames, but you have to create your own entertainment around these parts. He looks over to me, my middle finger waving at him—my signature salute. “Seems she may need more time down here. I’ll come back tomorrow to check on her.”

Mick grins, satisfaction turning his chunky cheeks a pink hue. “Lying piece of shit,” I mumble. “If you’re not feeling safe at home, just say that. Don’t blame your kinky, toxic love life on me.”

Novak the Quack works his jaw, but I see the glint that sparks in his eyes. He turns and strides toward Mick who throws his hands up, explaining something I can’t hear.

Mick comes back, that stupid grin back on his face as he taps on my glass three times rapidly. “You’ll be staying down here much longer than a day. I know what makes you tick.”

I moan, trying to roll away from the sound before it drags me under, but it’s futile.

*Mick the Dick would pay for this. Not today or tomorrow,
but soon.*

Chapter 3



“SO, WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME?” I ask the computer screen. Doctor Gentry sits behind a desk, white hair bolding, arms folded on his desk as he looks at me through his screen.

“Everything is in that file you’ve got between your hands.” He nods to Starlette’s file.

“Yeah, it’s thick.” I slap the substantially hefty manila folder on my desk. “But where is her history? Why is she the way she is?”

“Everything I know, you know.” He shifts in his brown leather chair. “Between you and me, that girl is a lost cause. I’d move on if I were you.” I nod, turning the video off without so much as a goodbye. If he couldn’t answer my questions then I don’t really need to talk to him a second

longer, do I? And just because he couldn't crack the solitary mind of Starlette, it doesn't mean I can't.

The thing is, I can't give up. She is like a puzzle with missing pieces. I have yet to leave a puzzle incomplete in my life. I lay awake at night agonizing over where the pieces fit, longing until the moment I could work on it again. So, there is zero chance of me giving up. I study until I become obsessed. Letting it take over my soul and feast on every inch of me.

I pull the old, wrinkled flyer out. Its print is fading with time, the edges crinkled with wear. It reads '*Missing Twin Girls*' at the top. A black-and-white printed photo of identical blonde girls in matching red sundress and bright smiles. Under the photo it reads: *Starlette and Sienna, age seven, last seen at Mulberry Park*. It lists the time and date, along with a number to contact. The local authorities, I'm guessing.

Next, I pull out a newspaper clipping that reads: *Twin girls who were kidnapped found ten years later*. There isn't much there, just a picture of the twins from the first flyer next to a picture of Starlette. A hoodie pulled over her head as she hides from the cameras. Eighteen years old. *What the fuck made you go from the smiling girl to the crazed woman I witnessed take a grown man down yesterday?* I have speculations, ones I hope are wrong but highly unlikely. I can't know for sure until she talks.

The next document is the police report. Starlette is found at the top of the stairs that lead to a basement. Clothes shabby and torn, skin covered in a thick layer of grime, malnourished with matted long hair. She's asleep beside two dismembered bodies. *Asleep, next to dead fucking bodies*. Another young girl was found in the basement, identical to Starlette.

My brow furrows at the police report. They question Starlette, thoroughly by looks of it. She said she didn't kill them, and the evidence backs her up. No blood on her skin or clothes, or under her fingernails, no fingerprints beyond the basement. But at the time she was the only one there besides her sister.

But why would a killer leave a witness? That's what gets me. She was eighteen at the time, an adult. So why leave a witness? And if she did in fact do this... Why did she not leave? Even in that mind frame, most people would run, not take a fucking nap.

Nothing about this adds up. No motive for kidnapping. Most kidnapers sell the victims to child sex rings, but they didn't do that—they kept the girls for ten whole years. And during those ten years, the police have no clue what was done to them because the kidnapers were found dead.

And Starlette has not uttered a word about it.

Not yet, anyway.

Starlette was put through a polygraph testing, which she passed, but they pushed for her to testify in the murder case. Because the law is twisted, these kidnapers deserved justice for their deaths even though they never received punishment for their crimes.

I scan the paper further. Starlette has had multiple psych evaluations done. Performed by several doctors. All found her not stable enough to stand trial.

I pull out another scrap of paper that mentions why she was sent here. Her mother and father could not handle Starlette, stating she was too traumatized to raise, and they needed assistance. In other words, it was easier to throw money at the problem than try to reason with and understand her. I'm not judging... much. But they only had her back for less than a week before she got sent here. In my professional opinion, they didn't even try.

A knock on my door startles me. I rub my face, clearing my head from the trance I have been in since I opened this damn folder. Having more questions but no answers. I throw the file in my drawer and stretch my arms. "Come in."

Elena walks in, her small frame huddled in a larger-than-life fur jacket. Short raven hair spikey. Cracked lips peeling back into a small smile. "Doctor Novak, pleasure to see you today," she says as she takes a seat on the love seat.

I rise, taking the seat across from her. “Pleasure is all mine, Elena. How are you feeling today?”

She nods at something over her shoulder, swinging her dark eyes back to me. “Better, although I do not like the padded rooms. Have you seen them? Every time I’m down there, the beast of the night appears.”

I nod, giving her full support in the delusions she cannot control. Even with the antipsychotics, she may still suffer from the voices and hallucinations. But the goal is to reduce them and find her a little reprieve. But that can only work if she takes them. And I can tell she hasn’t. I’ve been watching her. They never catch her, but I have.

“Elena, you have to stop hiding your medicine.” I lift one eyebrow at her.

She bites her lip. “They make me sick.”

“You have to give them a chance. The nausea will fade.”

She nods, a quivering lip poking out. “I miss the days I was normal. I wasn’t always like this. I woke up one day and heard voices, saw images. I...” she trails off. “I always had problems, triggers of sorts, but my mind seems to have fractured.”

I have many patients. Some are locked up like a vault, others need a hard push, and then there are those like Elena who trust the process. An open book, if you will. It’s one of the things I admire most about her. She hates taking her meds, but when it comes to talking, she says exactly how she feels with no shame.

“The brain is a beautiful creature, Elena. And together, with the help of your *medicine*,” I make sure to emphasize the word *medicine*, “you can live a functioning life again. Now,” I shift in my seat, “what triggered the outlash the other day?”

“I was having a good day, kicking Starlette’s ass at a game I made up, and then this man...” Her lip curls slightly. “He started pacing. Over and over again. You know who used to do that? My father. And it makes me so... so unnerved, like my body is itchy and I have to escape my skin. To make the

paced stop. And then..." Her hand clenches around the armrest, knuckles turning white under the pressure. "Nurse Mick came in, and I hate Nurse Mick."

I study the ridged lines of her body. The whites of her knuckles. The snarl taking over her chapped lips. "Why do you hate Nurse Mick, Elena?"

Her eyes swing back to mine. "Because he is an evil man," she whispers with such a bone-chilling intensity, it rocks something in me.

I know it's probably her condition, but something urges me to believe her, even just a bit. "I'll see if I can assign you a different nurse." She nods, pulling her fur jacket up her shoulders. "Where do you go after this?"

"Art therapy. When I first got here, forty-eight days ago, I didn't much care for it, but now I like it."

"Have you made any friends, Elena?"

She nods. "Yes. Starlette. Wicked name, right? I wish I had a cool name, but no, Mother gave me this basic, old-school name used since the beginning of time."

I hide my smile beneath my palm. Elena has a condition that tricks the mind, but when the fog clears, her personality shines through. It's phenomenal if not a little quirky. And I know in time we will get her functioning enough to live a full and healthy lifestyle. "And Starlette is a good friend?"

Elena smiles, the first sparkle in her eyes I've seen since she arrived. "The best. She's the only one who's not afraid of me. She dances with my demons instead of running from them."

When she leaves, I go back to Starlette's file, reading over the letter her last doctor left to me.

PATIENT IS HIGHLY INTELLIGENT, ABLE TO MANIPULATE TO GET what she wants in any situation. She's charming, immaculately convincing to a point I am not sure she could ever harm a fly, but her lack of remorse for the victims is chilling.

When asked about love, she simple shrugs, as if the basic human feeling is not one she understands or has ever felt. This leads me to believe she lacks all emotions.

She's impulsive at times. Acting out in violence toward others. She is dangerous, no doubt about that. Although I haven't figured out what triggers this violence, I know it's something.

I can't prove this, but I know she's lying about the murders. It's what psychopaths do. She demonstrated the violence within these walls; she's capable of murder.

Every session is a game to her. Can she get in my head, can she make me tick? She is the most infuriating patient I have ever had and the reason I am retiring.

She's a lost cause and will probably take every single secret to the grave. A locked vault, if you will.

Good luck to you, Doctor Novak. You will need it.

“YEAH, NO SHIT,” I MUMBLE UNDER MY BREATH, TOSSING THE paper back into the file.

Rising from my chair, I make my way down the hallway and stop when I hear Elena shouting. “You have to get her out of there before the beast of the night takes her.”

“Elena.” I approach her calmly. She looks to me, wide, pleading eyes frantic. “What's wrong?”

“Starlette is still in the padded room—or maybe, it got her.”

“What?” I swing my eyes over to the therapist. “She should have been out yesterday.”

“I don't know. I'm only in charge of art therapy.” The lady throws her hands up.

God fucking...

Turning back to Elena, I say, “Calm down. I will go check on Starlette. She will be in class shortly.”

When I see that Elena visibly relaxes, I turn on my heel, stomping to the elevator that takes you to the psych floor.

Chapter 4



WHAT IS LOVE?

What a stupid question. And how vapid they must be to think I don't feel it. I don't know how to define a feeling that is so encompassing you would do anything to protect it. Love is irrational, a downward spiral of many emotions. Love is warm, like my favorite gray fuzzy blanket that lays on my bed at home, collecting dust. Love is cold, like an icy snowstorm. Beautiful but deadly. Love is confusing. So, how the fuck can I describe it? Is there a right answer? Should I have put down the dictionary definition?

An intense feeling of deep affection.

Yeah, no thanks, Google. I'm not letting the internet define my feelings.

I know I love my sister. The other half of me. The identical replica of my very anatomy. I love my sister who gets to live a normal life in the real world. A sister who has yet to visit me since I arrived. Today, I love my sister like a thunderstorm. Violently. Because why has she not come to see me yet? Maybe she's embarrassed of me. Maybe she blames me for the kidnapping. If I hadn't stressed that we go to the swings, maybe *they* wouldn't have taken us. The swings were far too close to the streets. And yet, who was the dumb fuck who put the swings that close to the street anyway? Pathetic.

I shake the beginning of a violent ripple of memories that threatens to break through. I don't have time for that today. Not when I've finally been set free from my cage. I don't particularly enjoy art therapy. To freely express myself and let it all out through art. I find it vacuous, but Elena loves it. Her face lights up as she swipes the brush across the canvas. Paint splattering on the apple of her cheek from the force of her swiping. Eyes wide and alive as she paints literally nothing.

Mine is lackluster, the white of the canvas disappearing behind a harsh black paint, the whole surface like a black hole. Void of any emotion, of any clue what is doing on inside my head. Just the way I like it.

The padded room of fun is never a vacation, like Nurse Mick likes to joke about. He sat down there, next to my glass window, talking and banging on the glass as if that is what he's being paid for. I'm not sure how he hasn't been fired yet. I guess because none of us are practically creditable. Who would you believe? A nurse or a psych patient? *Exactly.*

We finish up art therapy, cleaning the brushes, rinsing off the palettes. It's the same routine every time. Honestly, it's the same routine every single day. Only, the activities change. We have breakfast, then we take our medicine, followed by our regular therapy sessions. Next, we go to the rec room, then we have lunch, and after that, depending on the day, we do a certain activity. Only then do we partake in a form of group therapy, followed by dinner, then it's lights out. Same boring fucking shit again and again.

Sometimes, I get these urges to be reckless—to add a little spice to my life, if you will. So, I pick fights with Mick, because he’s a cunt who deserves no peace in his life. On top of that, he treats us all like animals. Like we’re all a circus act, here to perform for him.

I knock on Doctor Novak’s door. The door is tall and imposing, solid oak with a new cherry stain that doesn’t match the rest of the hallway. I get the feeling he is important. I’m just not sure why or how—yet.

“Come in,” he calls in the same boring tone as always.

I take in the expanse of the room. The rich greens of the plants, the soft shades of beige of the blankets and accent pillows, the chocolate brown of the leather chairs and couch, the shades of brown of his desk. It’s oddly cozy for a man that’s pricklier than a cactus.

His eyes flash at me, not in the way the nurses do with fear or dread, but as if he sees me as a challenge. The same way my eyes flash at him.

His hair is tussled, shades of rich browns swept back, thick eyebrows neatly trimmed. His eyes are framed by long black, thick lashes I’d kill to have, the greens of his eyes mossy and rich, holding something a little darker inside. Alluring in a way bad temptation is. His nose is a little crooked, as if he’s broken it one too many times. His lips are plush and full, a slight pink tint to them. His jaw, square and strong, is covered in dark stubble. I’ve never touched a stubbled face, and I wonder if I run my finger along the edges of his jaw, through the sharp stubble, if it’ll hurt. Or would it be as soft as the hair on his head looks?

I take in the deep green sweater, tight and stretching around the expanse of his chest. He’s tall and imposing, shoulders broad and wide. Arms full and cut under the suffocating material. His tree-trunk thighs engulfed in dark blue jeans. They’re slim and fit and end at his loafers that look more like boots with the height and the laces.

He’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, but I haven’t seen much beyond walls of cages, so what do I know?

A thick eyebrow arches when I just stand there. Pink probably heats my cheeks, but I play it off. Walking over to the chair, taking a seat on the cool metal that bites through my thin leggings. He walks from behind his desk, cool confidence radiating from him and permeating the air. Taking a seat directly across from me.

“How was it in time-out, Miss Fawn?” Formal. Nice.

I tilt my head, eyes connecting with his. “A vacation, of course.”

He rubs his index finger over his plush bottom lip, eyes slightly narrowed. “Is that so?”

I mimic the movement. “Yes.”

He ignores my blatant mockery. “Very good. Today I’d like to get to know you a little better.” *You and everyone else. Get in line, but be aware, it never moves forward.* “Did you have a happy childhood?”

“Did *you*?”

He smirks just a tiny bit, but I catch it before it disappears. “For the most part, yes. Your turn.”

My tongue pokes out to moisten my bottom lip. His eyes cut to the motion before quickly connecting with my eyes once again. A strange feeling washes over me, warm and exciting, something I have never felt before. So, I can’t tell you what it is. “Next question, Doctor.”

He taps his pen against his thigh. One, two, three times. My body shudders, goose bumps rise along my skin, and my mind begins to wage war on itself. “Please, stop.” It comes out pained, as if the sound of his tap-tap-tapping is inflicting torture upon me.

The sound stops, and my vision focuses. “What just happened there?” he asks, genuine curiosity in his gaze.

I shake my head. “Triggers. Words and noises in threes trigger me.”

“Triggers you how, exactly?”

“Pass out.” He looks at me skeptically, writing something down on a pad that sits next to him on the table.

He clears his throat. “Miss Fawn, you do realize if you open up to me, you will improve? If you improve, you get to go home. Why do you not want to go home?”

“Because...” I trail off, something blocking my brain from answering him, but the words I want to say are there, right on the tip of my tongue.

“You had a bad home life? Traumatic childhood, maybe?”

“I had an amazing childhood before they took us,” I snap.

My eyes widen when I realize I gave him a piece of me. Something about this man compels me. It seems like this war may be harder than the ones I’ve fought before.

“Then, why?”

“I don’t know. Okay? I don’t know. I just know I can’t go back there.”

He nods. “I see.”

“Do you? Because I can’t. And if you have one inkling about what goes on inside my brain, please, enlighten the class, Doctor Novak.” My chest heaves at my outburst, heart racing in my chest. His lips tilt and my anger rises even more. Who is this man and how do I get rid of him? No one makes me snap or lose my composure. Gets inside my head.

He leans his elbows on his knees, resting his head on a fist. “Tell me about the kidnapping, Starlette.” Six words and my walls go back up. My mind quiets and my body relaxes.

“No, Doctor Novak. I don’t think I will.”

“Why?” His jaw tics, a muscle jumping there.

“Why should I give you pieces of me, when you have offered very little in return? You stated on the first day that we do not respect each other. Now, you want my life story? No.” I laugh, flipping my long hair over my shoulder. “I don’t think so.”

“Fair.” He lifts his frame from the chair, holding out a hand. It’s big, veins protruding and disappearing up the sleeve of his sweater, fingers long, bare of any rings, I note. “Why don’t we start over?”

I smirk, leaning forward. The neckline of my big t-shirt giving a peek of my naked breasts underneath. “I don’t give second chances, Doctor.”

I rise up, heading for the door. I feel his eyes on me. Hot and penetrating, setting my skin on fire. But he doesn’t say a word, doesn’t try to stop me as I make my exit. Slamming his big door, pictures rattling against the wall.

That man is dangerous. The smartest I’ve come across yet. His appearance is like a weapon, disarming me. If this is the battle, I’d have to up my game.

Bring bigger guns next time.



She always acts as if she got the short end of the stick being locked up here.

But she has no idea. No idea what true hell is. Because some of us didn't forget what happened in the basement. Some of us have to relive it over and over again while she simply walks around with a chip on her shoulder.

Poor Starlette.

But she really only knows half of it. Not for long, though...

She'll learn the truth soon. Feel the pain I live with every single day.

But for now, I'll mess with her. It won't take long for her to come to the conclusion that she is certifiably crazy. It's all anyone ever says about her anyway.

Enjoy your peace while you can, Starlette.

Because I'm coming for you.



I wake to the sounds of alarms blaring. Mops and brooms rustle beside me in the dark, small space. The smell of lemon and bleach assaulting my nostrils. The supply closet, but why am I in a closet?

I rub my eyes, trying to recall how or when I got here. The last thing I remember is group therapy. Rodger said something and then... And then what? I have no clue.

I crawl to the door, pushing it open slightly to see what's going on. The hallway flashes with red lights, like a bad horror movie, but it's empty. The alarm blares as I sneak out, the sound bouncing around my skull and ringing in my ears, causing me to wince as I make my way down the hallway.

A hand wraps around my wrist, a scream on the tip of my tongue when I'm pulled into an alcove, out of sight. A strong chest brushes against mine, hands tight around my wrist as minty breath hits my face. "Where have you been?" Doctor Novak's voice that is usually bored is rough, as if he's been smoking a pack a day for ten years. His broad body leans over mine as he pushes me until my back hits the wall. The feel of him is electrifying, pulsing through the base of my spine. "I asked where you've been, Starlette." My name is a growl. The way the syllables fall from his lips as if it's a dirty secret has me slightly arching into him.

“I don’t know,” I say breathlessly.

He chuckles darkly. “No one is buying your lies, Miss Fawn.”

I yank on my wrist, which is futile; he could wrap a thumb and a pinkie around my whole wrist, twice. “I’m not lying. I woke up in a supply closet.” Even to me, it sounds absurd.

“You’re telling me you’ve been asleep in the supply closet for twelve hours?” His eyebrow arches.

Shit. Twelve hours? Why can’t I remember?

“I guess so,” I reply.

“You guess so?” His voice is calmer now, his hold on my wrist loosening enough to not hurt.

“You’re sounding like a parrot.”

“And you, Miss Fawn...” His face is closer, breath fanning over my lips. His hard body crushes mine into the wall, and I find that I love the delicious weight of him. “...are sounding like a liar.”

If I lean even an inch closer, our lips will touch. And why the fuck am I thinking about that? I blink, focusing on his eyes. “I’m not lying,” I whisper.

His eyes fall to my lips, holding for a second before snapping back up. “I don’t believe you.” The chill in his tone exhausts out the tension between us.

He pulls me by my wrist, loafers clacking against the warn tile. “Where are we going?” I ask, my legs tripping over one another to keep up with his longer strides.

“Time-out,” he clips.

I dig my nonslip socks into the uneven ground, trying to pull my arm free. I wish I had actual shoes on. “No. I’m not going back there.”

“Yes, you are.” His pull is more forceful.

“Please, don’t make me.”

He stops so abruptly, I crash into his back. His arms latch onto my waist, the feeling both shocking and exhilarating. The touch makes my body vibrate with energy. “I’m not lying, I swear.” My voice is raw and husky, a sound I’ve never made before.

His jaw tics. “Even if you’re not, you’ve been gone for twelve hours, doing God knows what. I will not bend the rules for you.”

There is a finality in his tone. So, I don’t argue as we climb into the elevator or when we enter the chamber of padded rooms. Don’t show emotion when Mick the Dick grins.

“Fuck with her, and I’ll make you disappear.”

My eyes widen at Doctor Novak’s words as he gently guides me into a room. No cuffs this time. No, this is how they punish you. Almost like solitary confinement. Doctor Novak’s eyes glare at Mick, who takes a step back, nodding in acknowledgement. With one last fleeting glance my way, Doctor Novak leaves.

I stare at Mick, a smirk on my lips as I flip him off, watching his chipmunk cheeks turn red. Fire burning in his eyes.

And then I do some reflection. But wait, that’s right. Nothing is wrong with me.

Except sometimes, I wake up in places without any recollection of how I got there.

Chapter 5



THERE IS SO MUCH GOING on in my head. None of them appropriate, or even rational. The way my body reacts to her is unprofessional. Against so many policies. The board could start a case based off just my thoughts. Under no circumstances will I allow myself to touch her again.

Things about Starlette don't add up. Even for a psychopath, her eyes, the true confusion in them as she swore she had no clue how she ended up in that supply closet, looked real—genuine. Could she be that convincing? There's no other explanation. She uses amnesia as her excuse when she gets caught in one of her spontaneous adventures. I'm more concerned with how she's getting out. How did she escape the first time?

There's a knock on my door, and a glance at the clock tells me it's after hours. "Come in."

"Hi, Doctor. I was on my way out and saw your light was still on. I was wondering if there was anything I can do for you?"

The invitation is there. Nurse Rebecca is beautiful. Short, wavy chocolate hair, bronze skin that shines in the light. She is lacking nothing, and with the way my body hums with undiluted lust from my earlier encounters, it's tempting. "No, I think I'm good. About to head out myself."

The glint in her eyes fades, back straightening. "Oh, okay. Let me know if there is ever anything I can do for you." I nod, dismissing her.

I pull out the thick file of Starlette Fawn. Wondering if maybe I, or her previous doctors, missed something, but no. She shows textbook traits of a psychopath. Hell, I witnessed it when she looked at the photos of the crime scene. And still, in the back of my mind a small, violent urge is telling me I'm not getting the full picture. That maybe, this is her defense mechanism.



I WATCH HER, STARING AT THE PADDED CEILING, OBLIVIOUS TO anything around her as she sings. The nursery rhyme of "Ring Around the Rosie" on a constant loop. Her head bops to an imaginary tune, body stretched out.

Her head turns, eyes connecting with mine. The color is slightly off. Her body that usually carries a stiffness is completely relaxed. Even the smile she flashes me is off, but familiar. Like that first day I came in and she stopped to shake my hand. She studies me as I study her, eyes tearing every thread of clothing from my body. As if she's undressing me, leaving me wanting.

Seduction. That's how she's escaping.

Her head turns back to the ceiling, mouth forming the words of the song, but no lyrics behind it this time. Something is off, or maybe she's never shown me who she really is. A siren that drags you under and feasts on your flesh as you lay dying in pure ecstasy.

"She's marvelous, is she not?" Mick speaks next to me. Startling me out of my trance.

"What do you mean?"

He smiles, tapping on the glass, trying and failing to get her attention. "When you get her out of her shell, she's violent, but so... irresistible. I like her better this way."

I watch her, pure sexual energy radiating from her as she lures you in. "And how do you break her shell?"

He chuckles. "That's my secret, Doctor."

Chapter 6



SEAFOAM GREEN AND LAVENDER, the color of calm and peace. The very same colors of our group therapy room. But I feel anything but calm. Especially not peaceful. There is a group of twelve of us today. Five men, and seven women counting Elena and myself. Everyone is anxious, bouncing their legs, biting their nails. Hyped up to see their loved ones tomorrow. Not me, though. I know my parents will come. Bearing gifts of new and comfy clothes and my favorite rose-scented lotion and bodywash. Maybe a new pair of slippers. Cheetah print, if they remember anything about me at all. They'll be happy to see me as I overlook them. Looking for the one face that matches my own, then feel the deep root of despair when she doesn't appear.

I've been out of confinement for a day, skipping my visit with Doctor Novak this morning. He didn't come looking for me, and for that, I'm thankful. He didn't believe me, and for some reason that hurt. No one ever believes me. The funny thing is, I've never lied about anything. I just don't offer up my past. They teach you to move on from the trauma. So, why do they constantly bring it up?

"Would you like to share anything today, Starlette?" Doctor Jenkins, a small woman with a mother's loving face, kind eyes, and curly gray hair, asks.

I don't ever give Doctor Jenkins any trouble, but today I'm mad. "Yes, actually, I would."

Shock flashes in her eyes. Probably because I always politely decline. "Very well." She nods with an encouraging smile.

I brace my elbows on my knees, laying my face in the palms of my hands. "I've been put in confinement twice in the last two weeks. For reasons that are unfair. To be honest, Doctor Jenkins, I'm tired of it."

"Me too!" Elena screams. Everyone in the group shifts, slightly agitated just by her tone.

"The first time was because I tried to stop Nurse Mick manhandling Elena over here." I point to my friend.

The energy in the room shifts, agitation fueling fire to the already nervous minds. Doctor Jenkins frowns. "Did you report it?"

"From the padded room?" I smirk. "No. But who are they going to believe? Me, a woman labeled as crazy, or a nurse?"

She nods. "I'll see what I can do."

"That's what you all say." Rodger shifts, his knuckles turning white as he holds them into fists. "But you never do," he protests.

"Yeah," more speak up, claiming the unfairness of the padded room and the reasons we are sent there.

Chairs scrape against tile. Some tossed to the ground in outrage. I lean back in my chair as everyone rises. Distain on their faces as they hurl insults to Doctor Jenkins. “All right, everyone. Settle down.” She tries to gain control of the room with soft tones, but no one listens.

Soon an outbreak of activity begins. Chairs and tables being thrown. Things breaking under the harsh grips of each patient that’s been mistreated.

And I realize, with no particular feeling on the matter, that I’ve started a riot.

The room is mayhem, patients shouting and banging on the glass windows. Some stand on top of chairs, others ripping up papers and throwing them around the room. Doctor Jenkins frantically presses the panic button, eyes wide as she takes the chaos in. Until they land on me. I’m calm, relaxed in my chair, face a void of emotion.

Red lights flash in the room, alarms blaring as nurses run in, trying—and failing—to calm the mass of upset patients. I rise, walking on stable legs as I exit the room, face smacking straight into Doctor Novak’s hard chest. “What is going on in there?” He looks beyond me, into the chaos.

“What is going on, Doctor Novak, is that everyone is losing their minds. You’re welcome.”

He looks at me, eyes switching between mine as he tries to read behind my mask. “Why?” The question comes out exhausted. Like he hasn’t slept since the last time I saw him.

“Because you didn’t believe me. None of you ever do.” He shakes his head at this, pushing me aside to help with the mess I left behind.

I go to my room, watching the rain fall behind steel metal bars. Wishing I could smell the wet, earthy scent, feel the cool mist on my skin. That I could lay on the damp earth, and just breathe for a minute.



HAVE YOU EVER VISITED SOMEONE IN JAIL? YEAH, ME neither, but I saw a visitation room in a movie one time, and this is exactly what it looks like. Cold ceramic tables with plastic chairs that have wide backs. The room is bright, no hidden corners left unseen. The walls are white as well as the tile floors.

Families smile, hugging their loved ones. The room is loud with laughter and chatter. All of it echoing around the bare walls.

My mom and dad sit in the back of the room. Mom's blonde hair has streaks of silver through it, her face covered in small, worried lines. But her smile, it lights up the room. She wears a light sweater over a burgundy dress. It's a cozy look, as if she's going for coffee with friends. Her elegance is timeless.

Dad's light brown hair is graying at the temples. He has that look of a peaceful man, but if you look into his eyes, you can see the sadness that lives there rent-free. Never disappearing. His sweater is a deep gray. His dad jeans make me smile a little, and his legendary white-and-blue New Balances. I'm sure he has those dorky tall white socks folded at his ankles.

They smile when they see me approach, my hair for once is in a loose side braid and not frizzing all over the place. I wear a cropped hoodie with black leggings, my cheetah-print tennis shoes on my feet squeaking with every step I take.

Mom stands, coming toward me, embracing me in the sweet aroma of Chanel No. 19 and laundry detergent. The smell settles my nerves. I remember how I used to crave it when they—

Dad pulls me into his arms, a bear hug so tight it lifts me off my feet. "Missed you, sweetheart," he murmurs, kissing my hair.

We take our seats as I look over the many shopping bags that rest on the table. I readjust myself, trying to find a comfortable position in the unforgiving hard chair. Mom gazes at me, eyes adoring with affection. As if she could truly love

the sick person I am. She starts pulling things from the bags, placing them on the table before me. “Oh, honey, I wish you’d come shopping with me. But until then, you’ll have to wear what I buy you. Thank goodness I have stellar taste. I got you some new jeans, for when you decide to come for a day trip. Oh! I found these cute comfy sets, the fabric is almost like a knitted material, and they’re so soft. And look, matching crop top tanks.”

I watch the jeans pile high with holes in them, all designer. The knitted outfits she’s so excited about? Not going to lie, they’re amazing and a tad sexy, in a comfy way. I can’t wait to wear them. Lots of loungewear, including t-shirt dresses, new silky pajama sets, and oh, look, cheetah-print slippers. So, they do remember. She moves on to makeup I’ll never wear, along with skin routine products—those I will be using. Lots of toiletry, and a new blanket.

“And guess what I found?” Mom asks, a devious smile on her face that has my lips twitching.

“What?”

Dad laughs, his face breaking out into pure joy as he watches us. “Hair chalk!” Mom pulls out a cardboard box with colorful chalk inside.

“What is that?” I ask, reaching over to grab it.

“You know, to make your hair fun colors.”

“Neat,” I deadpan.

To onlookers, I probably look unemotional—unalive. But I truly am overwhelmed with emotions. I love everything on this table and the two people who sit on the other side of me, but there is one missing person, and that’s why it’s so hard for me to look happy.

I look over their shoulders and behind me, searching for my face in the crowd. Hoping today will be the day she comes. “We’re ready for you to come home.” Mom’s voice brings me back to the present.

I shake my head. “I’m not coming home until I see her. By the way, has anyone ever asked Sienna if maybe she’s the one

who did it? Killed our kidnappers?”

Mom’s face falls, and I internally curse. I shouldn’t have been so harsh about it, but seriously, why does everyone think it’s me? “She couldn’t have, because...”

“She’s not sick like me, huh, Mom?” I push away from the table, no longer interested in family time, ignoring the calls from my parents, the ache in my chest growing at not hugging them goodbye. The tear in my soul expanding from my sister not coming to see me, yet again.

Yes, the smell of my mother is comforting. Like your favorite childhood blanket would be. Yes, my father feels safe, but it comes down to this: I’ve lived more of my life away from them than with them.

And yes, they are my parents, but I don’t really know them, do I?



IT’S LATE, STARS SHINING BEHIND THE TREES OUTSIDE MY barred window. The light from the hallway casts a small glow through the observation window of my door. My room is dark, the sheets my mom bought, silky and smooth, feel cool against my skin.

But I wait. I wait for the nurse who will peek through the little glass on my door in approximately thirty seconds. Like clockwork, they come every hour on the hour. To make sure I haven’t escaped or figured out a way to hang myself from the ceiling.

I shift on my pillow, watching the shadow that stands at my door. Tall and broad, it erases any light from the hall, casting my room in pitch black.

The darkness would scare some, but I learned a long time ago to make peace with the imaginary dangers that are a projection of the mind. I find it better to not see the danger coming, because once it’s that close, you can’t do anything

about it. Might as well live in ignorant bliss instead of counting down the seconds until it gets you.

The door opens, the large figure stepping in. The closer it gets, the more the hallway light casts a mocking glow around the figure, like a halo. My body is tense, everything inside me screaming to make the first move, to not fall victim to it. It eases closer, the seconds counting down slowly.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

The figure stops at the foot of my bed, its head cocking slightly to the side. I feel the stare even though I cannot see it. It's assessing, calculating its next move.

I steady my breathing, knowing whatever this is, a dream or real life, I have experienced worse and will not give pleasure to the figure by showing my fear.

Don't be the prey. They like it more when you're scared.

The dark haze stays at bay, just on the very edge of my soul. Watching, waiting...

"I brought your things."

The voice has me relaxing, the cool tone of boredom oddly comforting. The sound of bags clanking against the tile breaks the tension in the air. Eliminating the fear that clouds my mind. "What are you doing in my room?"

"Dropping your things off," Doctor Novak says simply.

I can't see his face to see if he looks as nonchalant as he sounds. "Are you sure that's why you're really here?" My voice comes out a little breathy, a siren melody reeling in her prey.

"Why else would I be here, Miss Fawn?"

I shift beneath my sheets, rubbing my thighs together to lower the stinging ache his voice leaves between them. "Maybe you came to see me. To do what your eyes promise. Come on, Doctor Novak. We both know how you look at me."

His laugh is low, a single finger tracing up the curve of my knee. So light, it's almost phantom. As if I am imaging it. But then I feel it, more fingers digging into my thigh before his hand is gone just as quickly. "I look at you as my patient. The one who missed a session today and will be giving me two hours instead in the morning. Now get some sleep, Miss Fawn. I'm breaking through that mind's barrier tomorrow."

And then he's gone, the door closing quietly behind him. His whisper of a touch replaying over my skin as if he's still touching me.

Game on, Doctor Novak.

Chapter 7



SOMETIMES, I'm bitter.

Bitter of the memories I'm left with. How they feel like my own personal prison even though I am free to roam wherever and whenever I want.

And sometimes, I self-project those feelings on to Star. Like not allowing her to see me. Doing small things to creep her out. Moving her little bits of stationary on her OCD-perfect desk around.

Not only that, but I would kill to have my parents care as much about me as they do her. Showering her with gifts and showing up to the limited number of visits she's allowed.

So, yes, I mess with her.

But all I really want is to protect her.

That's why she has to remember. Remember every little detail. She doesn't know it, but she's in danger. Evil has no bounds when it comes to where or what it can reach.

I run my finger over the outline of my reflection in the mirror. Our faces are much the same but oh-so different. Our scars almost identical inside and out. But that's where people always get it wrong. We may be similar, but we are not the same.

Although we both look excellent in blue.

Sighing, I walk over to her bed. She sleeps so peacefully for someone who has a darkness clouding their soul. Maybe it's the medication that knocks her out, blocks all the nightmares. Or, maybe, like everything else she does in life, she hurts on the inside but never allows it to show on the surface.

Taking a seat at Star's desk, I fight the urge to turn everything slightly to the right and three millimeters over.

Instead, I pull her cute little pens over and I begin to write her a message. One I hope she heeds, because it won't be long now.

DEAR S...



I wake with a gasp. A slow trickle of cold sweat sliding down the side of my face and dripping onto my chest. My brain grasps to grab the frayed edges of the blurry dream, but it evaporates. Leaving not a single thread behind.

I look down at the silk blue pajama set covering my body and my brow furrows. I'm sure I had cotton shorts and a big shirt on when I went to bed last night. I rub my head, a headache blooming behind my eyes and stretching to the back of my neck.

Shit. Maybe I changed and don't remember? That's the only logical explanation. Or maybe I dreamed I changed my night clothes, and I originally had this silky set on to begin with?

My desk chair is ajar, snagging my attention to the white envelope sitting neatly on my desk. On shaky legs, I rise. My fingertips skate over the thick envelope, a black rose drawn in the corner. I untuck the seal, pulling out a folded sheet of paper. The paper is white, the same black roses a border around it.

Dear S,

I think it's time we talked.

-P

I collapse into my chair, the paper falling to the ground. This person was in my room, they used my stationary, my pen which is sitting with the tip down in the pot instead of up like I always put it.

Three questions run through my mind:

How did this P person get into my room?

Who are they?

And why did they come to my room?



I knock on the big, dark door, frowning at the doorknob. There is no way Doctor Novak actually touched me, but then I saw the bags abandoned by the edge of my bed this morning. So many things about last night don't add up in my mind. I can't pick apart dream state from reality.

It's weird, I've never liked anyone before. Never had the chance to. But ever since I walked into his office and saw his grumpy yet handsome face, something in my stomach fluttered and it never stopped.

I'm not inexperienced, I've used my body countless times to get my way. Sometimes I enjoyed it—everyone has needs—but other times made me want to gag, scrub my body until it was raw. But the thought of my doctor has this ache inside me, so intense and needy, I feel the need to take care of it right here at his imposing door.

“Come in.” His deep voice doesn't lesson said ache. Doesn't snap me out of my mindset to the one that tells me this is wrong.

I walk into his office, the rain pounding down on his window that overlooks the yard. His window doesn't have the bars blocking the view. You could see the dense forest for miles from the view on the mountain this building sits on. Escaping is pointless but not impossible.

His room is chilly, making the exposed skin of my legs break out into goose bumps. I wore one of the t-shirt dresses my mom got me, pairing it with my new cheetah-print slippers. Not very seductive, but it is comfortable. That's all you can ask for in a place that feels more like a prison than a hospital.

"Take a seat, Miss Fawn." His voice rolls over my skin, caressing me.

My toes scrunch into the furry material of my slippers as I walk over to the seating area, choosing to sit at the couch that directly faces his desk. He sits in his leather chair, thumb rubbing his bottom lip, highlighting the stubble covering his strong jaw. "Let's start with the basics, Miss Fawn." He leans over his desk, arms flexing under a thick wool material. "What's your name?"

I squirm, just a little bit, my thighs crossing over one another. His eyes flick to them for a brief second before his stormy green eyes connect back with mine. "What's *your* name?" I counteract, knowing I'm being childish, but no matter how much he makes me ache, we still have a game to play.

His lips quirk just a bit, the movement so small I almost don't see it, but I'm studying every bit of him. "Duke Novak."

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. "Are you some type of royalty or are your parents big dreamers?"

"Forgive me for not taking offense to someone with a name like yours."

I cross my arms, my foot bobbing in the air over my knee. "Starlette is a fairly normal name," I defend.

"It's not, but I got you to answer my question, so I won't argue." *Shit*. "Now, let's try something else. How old are you?"

"How old are *you*?"

He sighs, grabbing his pen and writing something down on a thick pad. "You're insufferable."

I smile. "I'm so glad you finally realize that."

He tosses his pen, eyes coming back to mine. "How about this, you tell me what I want to know, and I'll give you something you want?"

My eyes narrow on him. Would he, or is this just a ploy? My eyes leave his, going to the window. "What do you want to know?"

I hear him shift but don't look to him as my eyes follow a raindrop that's sliding down the glass pane. "Tell me about the day of the kidnapping."

I swallow, unlocking the box in my mind and pulling the faded memory out like an old photograph. My mind begins playing it out like a movie. As if I'm there again, reliving it. I open my mouth as the words tumble out.

The sun is blistering today, causing sweat to pour down the back of my tank top, pooling at the base of my spine at the top of my jean shorts. There are kids screaming, tiny bodies jumping in every square inch of the park. Sienna nibbles on her bottom lip, eyes tracking the movements of the kids in the playground. My twin's eyes flash to my face, the same frozen blue as mine. Her dirty blonde hair is braided, same as mine. Everything down to the light scatter of freckles dancing across her nose is identical to me.

"We should go play before Mom and Dad get done talking and we have to leave," I nag her.

"Yeah, you're right. Let's go swing."

I take off toward the swings but stop when I don't feel my sister's presence. Turning around, I see her standing exactly where I left her. Squinting my eyes, I rest my hands on my hips as I walk back over to my sister. "Come on, Sienna. Let's go."

She nibbles on her lip again, her feet shuffling on the green grass beneath her sneakers. "Momma said we shouldn't go to the swings, it's too close to the road."

I sigh, my grip on my waist tightening. "Momma isn't paying attention. Even if we get in trouble, I'll take the blame for it. Come on, it'll be fine."

Sienna nods hesitantly, her feet dragging as we walk to the swings.

I sit on the rubber seat. It burns into my thighs from the heat of the sun, but I don't care. I kick my legs back and forth, smiling as Sienna laughs, her braid flying in the air with the motion as we try to see who can swing the highest.

"Hey, girls." A soft voice comes from behind us. I look over my shoulder. A lady with short brown hair flowing from a sun hat smiles at us. Her dress is just as flowy, bright pink and orange flowers spread across white fabric. She looks nice. "Your mom and dad had to leave quick for important work reasons and asked that I drive you home."

Sienna jumps from her seat, wiping her sweaty hands on her jean shorts. "Sienna, wait." I jump down, walking over and grabbing her hand.

"My momma said never to believe strangers," I accuse the woman, taking a step back.

The lady smiles wider, straight white teeth flashing in the sun. "Your momma is a smart woman. I would know." She reaches a hand out. "She's got blonde hair and blue eyes. She's wearing jeans and a blue shirt today."

Huh. That description is Momma's, but something in my stomach tells me this isn't right. The feeling twists in my gut, making my heart pick up speed.

"Come on, honey. You don't want her to be upset with you, do you?"

No, I don't want that. I don't like it when Momma is upset with me. Shaking my head, I let my sister pull me along as we follow the woman to her black SUV parked by the street.

When my vision refocuses, my eyes connect with his, easing the ache in my chest as he sits on the coffee table beside me. His smell is intoxicating, like a drug I could get addicted to. Ruin my life over. It's spicy, with a hint of leather and cigar smoke. Rich and manly.

He swallows. "What is it you want, Starlette?" His voice is thick, eyes on my lips as he watches my tongue sweep out to

moisten them.

I want many things, but one thing by far outweighs the others. “I want to...” I look to the window. “I want to go outside, feel the rain on my skin.”

I look back over to him. He bites his lip, nodding and looking away. “Let’s go.”

“I need to change my shoes first.” He looks down to my slippers, lips struggling not to twitch.

“That you do.”



The yard is deserted, no one is allowed out when the weather is bad. The air smells fresh with wet dirt. That magical smell of rain bringing a smile to my face. I take a step out onto the damp grass, my boots sinking in a little. The first drop to hit my face is cool. I close my eyes, letting the raindrops envelop me. Throwing my hands to the sky, I spin in a circle, a laugh breaking free. It sounds a bit harsh, as if I haven’t used the sound in ages. When I think about it, I haven’t.

I spin some more, the soaked cotton t-shirt dress sticking to my skin as my wet hair flies around me. When I get dizzy, my boots too slippery to stay upright, I stop, looking through the wet drops clinging to my lashes. I see him, Doctor Novak, standing under the tree. A heavy water-resistant jacket hiding his build. I walk to him, mud splashing up on my exposed calves.

His eyes track my movements, the burn of his stare scorching. I stop in front of him, my eyes running up his chest to his thick neck, up the curve of his stubbled jaw. Until my head is tipped back, eyes locked with mossy green eyes so intense my body breaks out into goose bumps.

“Wanna dance in the rain with me, Doctor Novak?”

He shakes his head slowly, his eyes still glued to mine.

“Don’t you ever just live a little, Doctor Novak?” I try to taunt him.

He continues to gaze at me, eyes like melted sea glass. “No,” his hand reaches out, pushing a wet strand behind my ear, “but maybe I should.”

His hand curls around the back of my neck, my body falling into his as his lips crash down onto mine. I gasp, my fists clutching the lapels of his jacket, pulling him toward me. His hand slides from my head, lips hot and unforgiving as he devours me. His strong hands grip my thighs, dragging me slowly up his body as he carries me behind the tree.

My dress rises, exposing my silk panties. They scrape against his jeans. My backs of my thighs hit the bark, scratching against it to create a delicious sting.

I can’t believe this is happening. Is this happening? Are we...?

He pulls my hands from his jacket, trapping them above my head with one of his own. His lips ghost over my jaw, to my neck, making me moan, rubbing my pussy against him. His tongue licks the shell of my ear. “This is fucking wrong,” he whispers, biting down on my earlobe.

“I think,” I pant. “I think we can lay down the swords for a moment. Slip into insanity for just a minute.” I moan into the rain-scented air as he lays hot, wet kisses on my neck. Sucking on my pulse that beats erratically. “You know this feels right, Duke.” He growls at my use of his name, biting down hard onto my collarbone.

“No, Miss Fawn.” He suddenly takes a step back, dropping me to my feet, my legs shaky and unstable. I squeeze my thighs together as I lean into the tree, watching him run his hands through his wet hair. “That was a moment of weakness, it won’t happen again.”

“Suit yourself, *Doctor*. That was your one moment of peace from me. I live to fuck with my doctors.”

I’m lashing out, I know this. Rejection mixed with hurt is a very powerful concoction.

He sucks his teeth, eyes connecting with mine once again. “Better go play in the rain, because when I get you back in my office, I’m going to fuck your mind as hard as I want to fuck you.”

Shit. What? Why... A frustrated groan tears from my throat. Everything about him is so... refreshing. Dangerous. Addicting.

I walk into the rain, falling onto my back. Watching the raindrops go from small to big as they splash down onto my face. Doing absolutely nothing to cool my body down.



There is no cure for psychopathy. No magic pill to give me morals or empathy. Instead, they give me medication for ADHD. Let that one sink in. Because some of my symptoms overlap with it. I also take a mood stabilizer, which I get. Random outbursts and all that. Anxiety medicine for the trauma they keep telling me I experienced, but I don’t remember any of it. Antipsychotics, for my *thought disorders*, they say. Instead of making a pill to help me, they make me take this fun little cocktail.

I shake the pills in the plastic cup, watching them bounce off one another. Over the years, my mind has begun to reject the pills. Not as in they don’t work, but as in I have a hard time swallowing them. My throat closes up and I have to mentally will myself to take them. I toss the plastic cup back, letting the medicine lay against my tongue as my mind tells me to spit them out. I gulp a whole glass of water back, forcing them down the tight space of my esophagus.

“Open,” the nurse in front of me demands. I open my mouth, moving my tongue around so she can fully inspect that I’ve taken the drugs.

I leave the medicine room, walking down the hall while reading over the fun posters on the wall. Thinking about a certain doctor I crossed the line with, but I wasn’t the only one who crossed the line, was I? No. Because he had kissed me

back. Stupid man. Why play with someone you can never fix? There is no cure for my decomposing mind. I'm the villain, there will be no happy ending in my story.

I stop at my behavioral therapist's office. Another thing I have to do. This is my redemption, to learn to control my stone-cold urges to kill. I only want to kill one person, and that's Nurse Mick. But he's not worth a lifetime sentence in a criminal insane asylum. But have I thought about it? Most definitely. I mean, who wouldn't?

I knock on the door and Doctor Lawrence opens it up with her bright, cheery smile. "Come in, Miss Fawn."

I do, slouching in the chair across from hers. Doctor Lawrence and I have been playing this game for years now. We work on identifying my toxic traits and how to change them to be more desirable to society.

"I see you've spent quite some time in confinement." She looks down at her notes, eyes scrunching. "What's going on, Starlette? You were doing so good and then you broke out, went missing, and keep getting into trouble? I see you even started a little protest."

I nod, then shrug. "We both know I'm a bad apple, none of this should surprise you."

Doctor Lawrence frowns, shaking her head. "No, you're not. I think you've experience something you don't want to talk about, and when it all becomes too much, you lash out. Now, what can we do besides lash out, Starlette?"

I lick my lips, rolling my eyes. "Count to ten, evaluate the problem, and talk it out."

She smiles. "Very good."

But it isn't good because that never works.

And we both know it.

Chapter 8



I TILT MY HEAD, challenging Doctor Novak. He wants in my mind so bad he can hardly stand it. We've been at this for thirty minutes now, him doing the asking, me staying silent. I don't take kindly to denied orgasms or doctors, or people, really. But this man in particular is number one on my *fuck around and find out* list.

He thought he was going to get more out of me when he gave me a reward. He didn't. If anything, I became mute. I don't like being played. This is my game and he's my piece to toss around the chessboard. It's not the other way around.

He sighs, looking away first. A victorious grin lifts the corner of my lips. "Fine, let's up the stakes. You tell me about those ten years, and I'll give you something. For every truth, you get something in return."

“Hmm. What do you want to know?”

He looks down to my mutilated arms, face void of emotion, which I appreciate. “What did they do with you and your sister for ten years?”

I take a deep breath, closing my eyes and letting that first day come back to me.

Metal on my wrists keep me tied down to a dingy mattress in a cold, musty, dark room.

“Sienna,” I whisper.

“Over here,” she whispers back.

I can't see her, but I strain my ears in the direction of her voice. “Are you okay?”

“I think so... Where are we?”

I shake my head even though she can't see me. I look around again, only to see nothing. Pulling on my arms, but they get jerked back. “I don't know...” I answer truthfully.

I hear a commotion from up above me, my back stiffening as it grows louder until a door high above opens, light spilling in until it surrounds us. Cemented walls and floors, stained mattresses beneath my sister and me—we are on opposite sides of the room, chains holding us in place.

A man I've never seen walks down creaking wooden steps, a cigarette in his mouth as he smiles around it. I look away from him, my eyes connecting with a video camera, and my stomach sinks.

I should have trusted my gut feeling. We should have ran from the pretty lady.

His shirt is plaid, hanging loosely over a frail frame, his boots loud and echoing off the walls as he walks across the concrete floor. He heads toward Sienna, and I watch as she begins to cry.

Out of the two of us, she's always crying. Scared of the dark and any tiny noise. I have to protect her.

“Hey!” I scream.

The man stops, turning to look at me. “What are you doing with us?”

He grins, speaking around the cigarette. “Well, seems we have a brave one here.” He switches direction and steps toward me, and I hold my body taut to keep from shaking. “You don’t need to worry about what you’re doing here.”

“Oh, yeah? I think I do since I’m the one strapped to this disgusting mattress with some gross-looking man.”

His grin falls, and he grabs the cigarette from his mouth. “You better watch how you speak to me, One. Or I’ll punish you.”

Better me than her. So, I push a little harder, even though I want to curl up into a ball. “Probably won’t hurt. I’m not scared.”

The depraved grin replaces the anger. “Oh, you will be.” He walks over to the video camera, dragging it and the stand to rest in front of me. He clicks the on button, causing a red light to flash at me. “I would say this is nothing personal,” he shrugs, “but it is. Now. Wasn’t before.”

My back collides with the wall, and I look to Sienna whose lip is quivering as she squeezes her eyes shut. He bends down next to me, away from the camera, and I feel a sharp burn to my right arm. My eyes well as I look down, watching the ash melt into my skin from the cigarette. I scream when he shoves it in harder. The smell of burnt skin and cigarette ash like toxic waste in the air.

The man chuckles, walking over to the camera and stopping it.

My eyes flash back open, and I swallow. Doctor Novak studies me as I stare into his eyes, oddly finding some comfort in them. “They kept us in a basement,” I croak out.

He pauses. “And what happened in the basement, Starlette?”

I shake my head. “I’m not ready for that. I can’t...” I can’t say it out loud.

“That’s okay,” he placates. “What is it I can reward you with?”

I drop my eyes. The reward I would have asked for, I don’t want it anymore. Not after the little trip down memory lane. “I want to know something about you.”

He sits back in the chair, crossing his legs with his ankle on his thigh, the charcoal gray of his pants rising to expose plain black socks. “What do you want to know?”

“Are you married?”

I watch his left hand twitch on the armrest of the chair. “No.”

I don’t look up, instead I raise my legs up into the chair, picking at the grip on the bottom of my socks. We don’t have to wear these, I have softer ones, but I oddly love them. It means I don’t have to wear shoes if I don’t want to. “Why not?” I ask quietly.

He shifts before answering. “Just haven’t found the right one, I guess. My turn. Why do you want to stay locked up in this place?”

I run my tongue over my teeth. “Because I’ve become comfortable being locked up. I don’t know how I would deal in the real world. Last time I was in it, I got kidnapped. Why would I want to go back?”

It’s one of the first truths I’ve offered up in years. The world is a scary place, and I’m a monster that lurks in it. If my sister won’t even come to see me, how will anyone else accept me?

He clears his throat. “I think if you give your treatments a real chance, you may live a fairly normal life.”

I laugh at that. “Nothing about my life is normal, Doctor.” I look up, my eyes catching his. “Nothing about me is normal. Everything is a game, and everyone is a pawn. Be careful, Doc. I may not be a killer, but I’m still dangerous.”

His eyes become hooded as he studies me. “Why are you trusting me with information if I’m just a pawn in your

game?”

I bite my lip. “I don’t know.” I lift one shoulder, letting it fall. “That’s yet to be seen.”



I’VE KNOWN RODGER SINCE I ARRIVED AT THE AGE OF seventeen. He came a week before me, falling victim to being locked up here. I was intrigued by his longish coal-black hair and ice-blue eyes that reminded me of a painting of a wolf. His skin so pale, his mouth blood-red. He screamed bad boy, and I was every bit as interested in him as he was in me.

He looks over to me, tilting his head to the door of the rec room. I follow him, going to the outdoor exit. When it’s nice, we can go outside if we want to. I spot him walking into a dark corner where the trees give the illusion of privacy, even though that is not something we can obtain here.

He leans against a tree, arms folded over his white t-shirt. “I wanted to tell you something,” he says as I get closer.

“Yeah?”

He nods. “I’m leaving at the end of the week. I’m finally getting out of here.”

“That’s great. You shouldn’t be here.” I smile.

Rodger takes a step toward me. “You shouldn’t either, Star. Leave this place, come with me.”

I shake my head. “I belong here. I can’t leave. Plus, I’m a horrible person, you don’t want to be stuck with someone like me.”

He smiles, wrapping his arms around my waist. “That’s what I like about you, Star. You’re truthful to a fault.” He buries his face into the crook of my neck. “You’re going to let me give you a proper goodbye, yeah?”

“Always.”

And when he sucks on my neck, leaving a mark I know I'll have to cover up, I get lost. In his rough touch, in the grass beneath my naked back, the hard uncontrolled thrusts.

Rodger was my form of fun, the only one I've allowed in my life. So, why can I not get a certain brooding doctor out of my mind? Wishing it was his mark on my neck instead, him moving deep inside me and giving me grass burns to remember him by.

It's fucked up, and so wrong.

But I can't make it stop.

The visions that arise in my mind as my body glides over the damp ground are vivid. Doctor Novak's mossy green eyes pinning me in place. A strong hand holding my wrists with one hand like he did against the tree. The other hand biting into my hip as he plows into me with possession.

I come. Long and hard, Rodger following behind me, pouring his seed into me, knowing it's a requirement to be on birth control in this place.

"Holy shit, you were amazing," he whispers into my hair, laying a kiss there.

I wish I could say the same, but it was visions of my doctor that got me off. Not Rodger.

I'm so fucked.



ELENA PAINTS HARSH STREAKS OF RED ON HER CANVAS TODAY. Like splatters of blood. "You okay, Elena?" I ask, painting my canvas black.

She grunts, turning to look at me. "Doctor Novak pissed me off today. He said," she makes a face before continuing, "that I could go home in a year." She throws her hands up. "Home? I don't have a home." She smacks the brush against the canvas. "Back to my abusive and alcoholic dad? No."

I pause. “Maybe I’ll be ready to leave in a year and you can stay with me?”

She laughs. “No one wants me, not even you.”

I shrug. “Don’t know about that. I kind of like you.”

She stops murdering the canvas, turning to look at me. “You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack,” I deadpan.

“You must be truly fucked to want anything to do with someone who sees what I see.”

I put my brush back to the canvas. “Whatever you see, I’ve lived. Who cares if you basically get to have an acid trip every day, you lucky bitch.” She snickers. “Plus, haven’t you heard? I’m a stone-cold killer.” I wink at her, and she laughs harder.

“Two peas in a fucked-up pod,” she singsongs.

“You’re going to be fine, Elena,” I say seriously.

“You are too, Starlette.”

I wish she was right. But sadly, like so many before her, she’s wrong.

Chapter 9



MY EYES STRAIN in the darkness of my room. A figure rests in my chair, writing with my stationary. I rise slowly, the bed creaking under me. The figure pauses, turning its head so slowly. The pen drops from its hand, and it rises. It seems to grow in size, hair long and dragging across the ground as it takes one step at a time toward me. I swallow, my heart pounding inside of my chest as it grows closer. Sharp, razor-like nails outlined in the shadows reach for me.

“Starlette,” it screeches, launching for me...

My body jerks into a sitting position, sweat making the cotton of my sleep clothes stick to my body. I peer around my room that’s now flooded with light instead of dusted in nightmarish shadows. I blow out a breath, getting up and

walking over to the closet to grab my toiletries and an outfit to change into.

I walk to the door but pause at my desk. I gasp, chills ripping up and down my body as goose bumps break the surface of my skin. There, on my desk, lays a discarded pen and a piece of paper. Not in an envelope this time, as if they were in a rush. With shaky hands, I grab the paper.

DEAR S,

You can run but you cannot hide. I know all that lives inside.

The day we meet is near. I'm afraid there is no way to prepare.

We're inevitable. Made of twin DNA.

-P

I CRUMPLE THE PAPER UP, TOSSING IT IN THE TRASH CAN, AND for the first time in a long time, my

fight or flight kicks in. I quickly grab my things and all but run out of the door. I'm out of breath as I go into the shower room, thankful it's empty this morning. I turn the shower on to as hot as it will go and lean against the tiny sink in front of it, watching as steam rises.

My head pounds as I try to make sense of everything going on around me. Maybe it's a prank, or night paralysis. Maybe it's my sister who is paying someone to fuck with me. But it doesn't explain the dream or the fact that the pen and paper are exactly where they were left in the dream.

I've fucking lost it.

I step into the hot spray of the shower, letting it rid me of the chills and goose bumps. I bring my mind to a happy place. To yesterday with Rodger. He was my first, not that it's anything sentimental to me. But I did grow a liking to how he made me feel. The comfort of a familiar body. It was not

anything serious. One time, I walked in on him and Victoria in the showers and I felt nothing. I'm not sure I can feel anything beyond comfort for someone. Except my parents and sister. I feel an overwhelming amount of affection for them, and only them. Anyone else, it's either comfort or lust.

But maybe that's a lie. Because I do feel something for Doctor Duke Novak. Whether that be something real or sexual frustration, I'm not sure yet.

I turn the water off after I've washed every inch of my body and conditioned my hair. I wrap the towel around myself as I step out, avoiding the mirror. I always do, I don't like looking at what I've become. I slip my jeans on, pairing it with the random cropped tee I grabbed. I sit on the bench in the shower rooms, proceeding to do my skincare routine without a mirror. I brush my hair, braiding it. I slip on my socks and tennis shoes. Then I grab everything before leaving to drop my things off in my room.

I walk down the hall, seeing other patients rising up for the morning. Must have got up early today, though I wouldn't know because we aren't allowed clocks in our rooms. Could break the glass of the clock and hurt ourselves, I guess. Nothing we can hurt, hang, or kill ourselves with is permitted. Only reason I have a pen at all is because I've never stabbed anyone here or have a history of self-harm. A perk, I suppose. What's not a perk? Someone who comes and watches us use our razors once a week to make sure we don't turn them into a prison-style shank.

I walk into the cafeteria, opting for a banana and nut muffin and a carton of milk. I take a seat in the very back, away from the zombie-like patients that range from ages eighteen to one hundred. I hear there is a children's facility somewhere in one of the other buildings, but they keep us separated, of course.

A chair scrapes in front of me and I look up to see Rodger. "Hey, Star." He smiles.

"Rodger."

"Are we feeling a little sad today?" he asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t really feel sadness. I am, however, feeling a bit blah.”

He raises his coffee to his lips, taking a deep sip. “New meds?”

“No, new nightmares.”

He nods like he gets it, but he doesn’t. “That sucks.”

I open my mouth to say something, when a looming presence casts a dark shadow over my back. “Miss Fawn. Come with me.” Doctor Novak’s voice is calm, nice some might say.

“Only if I can bring my muffin.” I rise, saluting Rodger as I follow the good doctor out of the cafeteria and into the hallway.

He leads me into the stairwell, and I frown as I follow behind him. My back collides with the wall, my muffin falling from my hand and rolling to the ground. I gasp, trapped beneath a huge, imposing frame. Duke trails his finger slowly over my neck. “Who was dumb enough to mark you?” he grinds out.

“What?”

“You heard me, butterfly. Who was stupid enough to leave marks on your velvet neck?” His finger dips to my collarbone, trailing back up my neck, and I shudder.

“That’s none of your business,” I say breathlessly.

“Oh, but it is. You’re my patient, under my care. If anyone touches you, I want to know who it is. Because at the end of the day, butterfly, you’re mine.”

“You don’t own me, Doctor. This is a breach of our patient-doctor relationship.”

He smiles at that, pushing his knee between my legs. “One problem, you’re not exactly creditable, are you? So, if you told someone, they wouldn’t believe you.” He runs the tip of his nose over my cheek, inhaling my scent. It causes something foreign to shoot through me, curling around my spine and dipping into my stomach.

“What are you doing to me?” I whisper, my head falling back.

“Just getting in your head like you’re getting in mine,” he breathes, stepping back. “The things I want to do to you...” he trails off.

“What do you want to do?” I whisper.

“You feel that hunger, Miss Fawn? That deep throb in your pussy every time I’m in your vicinity?”

I nod, causing that sinister smirk to appear on his handsome face.

“Do you want the cure?” I nod again. “Well,” he says, flicking his tongue over my bottom lip. “All you have to do is rest that pretty head on my couch while you gag on my cock. And then I’ll fuck your little cunt with my tongue. Devoting all my worship to it. Slowly licking you from pussy to clit. Getting you high off my orgasms.”

My legs clench. My eyes lower as I slowly lick my bottom lip. The hunger he is talking about burning deep within my eyes.

“And then I’ll slowly slide my dick into your tight pussy. Destroying you for all men and claiming you as mine. You won’t walk right for days, and everyone will know my brand is written all over your body. I’ll mark this neck,” he squeezes lightly, “with my tongue, lips, and teeth. I’ll bring you to the edge, and right before you fall over, I’ll pull out, working you all over again until you realize how much I own this body.” He laughs at the lust-filled gaze on my face, before taking a step back. “I’ll see you later, Miss Fawn.”

Doctor Novak walks away, the door to the stairwell slamming behind him and leaving me breathless against the wall. What the hell is happening? Teasing me, denying me orgasms. Being positively obsessive for no reason.

And then he goes and calls me butterfly. I scoff. As if I could ever be something so beautiful.



I'VE NEVER HAD A PET NAME. NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT HOW IT would affect me. Because the idea of someone liking me enough to give me one is ludicrous. I use my free hour to go to the library today. The meaning behind such a simple yet mind-altering term of endearment has me curious as to what it may mean.

The librarian, Mary, an older woman with Coke-bottle glasses and lipstick staining her snarling teeth, gives me a serious look. I raise my hands in surrender, letting her know I'm not here to start any trouble.

I walk over to the computers that rest against the wall, wiggling the mouse to wake one up. I pull up the search engine, typing in 'the symbolism of a butterfly'.

New beginning. I laugh out loud. Mary shushes me. "Sorry, Mary. You know how crazy I am, I can't control it."

She huffs, looking away from me. I click out of the search engine and scrape my chair back loudly. I don't need to read the thousands of symbols and meanings to know he got it wrong. And this man has a PhD degree somehow. Maybe he's only book smart. Or the polluted air of this facility is getting to his brain. He should have called me monster or something similar to its dark nature. Butterfly? Yeah, no.

I walk to his office, banging on the door loudly. A grunt and then, "Come back during my office hours," greets me.

"I'm a monster not a fucking butterfly." I turn on my heel just as the door opens behind me. The back of my shirt is yanked back, and I'm immediately assaulted by his torturous scent.

"Did you come to yell, Miss Fawn?" he asks by my ear, his hot breath fanning over the side of my neck as he closes the door.

I turn to face him, my fists curling, nails embedding into my palms to form half-moons. I glare at him. "Yes, I did. Why

butterfly? Not sure if you've seen me but, I'm no butterfly."

He tilts his head in that way that makes me feel like an animal in an exhibition. "Have you seen yourself?"

I take a step back, stunned. "What?"

He takes a step forward, caging me against the oak door. His eyes are intense as he peers into my soul. I hate how he does that. As if he can strip me of my armor and see what no one else can. "Have you seen yourself in the last eight years?"

I swallow before pushing the lie out, "Of course I have."

"Lying may be your game but finding the lies is mine. And right now," he steps closer, too close, "you're lying."

My hand clutches the door handle behind me, and I yank on it, falling out of the room. He chuckles. "I'll see you, Starlette."

I look at him incredulously, shaking my head. Confusion wrapping around my mind as I walk briskly away from him.

I need a new doctor, this one is too clever for my liking.



"STAR," SIENNA WHISPERS INTO THE DARK ROOM THAT NIGHT.

I shift uncomfortably, my arm burning with each scrape against the mattress. "What is it?"

"Are you okay?" she asks, a tiny whimper in her voice.

"Yeah, it was nothing," I lie. It hurt like nothing I've ever felt before. Worse than when I scraped my knees while falling off my bike.

"Why was there a camera?" she asks.

"I don't know..." I answer honestly. I'm only seven, my world has been sheltered beyond compared, but something about that camera made me uncomfortable.

"Maybe if we go to sleep, we can wake up and this will be all just a bad dream," she says hopefully.

“Yeah, we’ll go to sleep and when we wake, we can laugh about the horrible nightmare.” I swallow.

“Good night, Star. Love you forever.”

“Love you always,” I whisper back.

I don’t sleep, though, because unlike Sienna, I know that falling asleep will change nothing. It will only make us more vulnerable.

I stare into the direction of the door, a tiny light coming from underneath it.

I must have fallen asleep because I suddenly wake with a jerk, a woman kneeling before me. “It’s okay,” she coos.

She places a cloth over my burns, and I fight the tears as I watch her hum and smile to herself. “Can we go home, please?” I ask.

She pauses, looking at me. “This is your home now. I’m your momma and I’m going to take such good care of you. See,” she nods to where she applies some sort of cream to my burns, “I’m a good mom.” She smiles, and something inside me shifts and breaks.

“But I already have a mom,” I whisper.

“Not a good one, or she would have kept better track of you.” She smiles at me again, pushing my hair behind my ear. “I’ll never let you out of my sight. Neither of you.”

My lip trembles. “Never?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. I’m going to take very good care of you, One.”

“My name is Starlette,” I bite out, the emotions taking over my body causing me to tremble with anger and sadness.

She tilts her head. “That’s not your name anymore. You are One and you will do whatever your father asks of you, okay?” She pats my leg.

“Who is he?” I ask.

“You met him earlier.” But I notice as she says it, fear enters her eyes. “Just do as he says, One. It’s easier that way.”

“Why can’t you just let us go? We won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

She frowns. “Why would I let my children go? Have you seen the world out there? It’s not safe.” She shakes her head. “No, you’ll stay here with me.”

After she leaves, I allow myself to cry. To mourn my old life.

I just really want my real momma and daddy right now.

Chapter 10



I SLAM my first glass of scotch back, slumping into my chair as I evaluate my actions today. What I've started is illegal, could cost me my fucking license but, fuck, I can't help it. Seeing her pretty skin marked, and not by me, had me in a jealous fit of rage. One I haven't experienced since *her*.

Julia. My sweet Julia that I couldn't save. The reason I do this fucking job.

I shake the thoughts from my mind, focusing on the laws I've broken the last two weeks. The kiss, caging her against a wall. How fucking stupid. What if someone saw us?

I pour another glass and take a sip, trying to erase her dark freckles and flashing eyes from my mind. But it doesn't work, all I can think about is her plush lips and how they gave me

her truths. I, Duke Novak, will be the first person to crack Starlette Fawn. Which is what makes this even worse. I want to do very unethical and non-doctorly things to her while helping her. Because I can already see her transforming. My butterfly.

Fuck it, I'm going to see her.

I walk out of my office. I should be in my on-site apartment right now, but I decided getting drunk in my office was a better idea. Closer to my current addiction. Two problems with that. One, I'm not even drunk. If I were, maybe that would rationalize why I'm doing what I'm doing. Two, I realize I don't need to be closer to her.

I nod at the nurses working the night shift, turning down her hallway until I'm blocking the light to her window. The moon highlights her pale skin. I watch as she rolls over, kicking the covers from her legs. Her face looks tortured, and I curse low in the back of my throat as I watch her thrust her tiny hand in her sleep shorts. I open the door, closing it behind me gently.

Fuck, look at her. All frustrated, letting out distressed moans with zero pleasure. I don't think as I walk over to her, watching her eyes flash open. Wanting me to help her as they plead with me. I lay in the bed beside her, placing my hand on hers as she works her clit.

"Sometimes, butterfly," I rasp, "you need to be gentle at first. Like this." I move our hands together, slow and teasing over her clit, and watch as her mouth falls open in a silent gasp.

I move our fingers inside her tightness, working them inside her to accept us. I curl our fingers up, rubbing her soft spot. "You feel that?" She nods, and I move my thick length against the side of her leg. I thrust our fingers in and out, slapping my free hand over her mouth to contain her moan. I pull our fingers out, and she bucks against the palms of our hands, her body desperate for release.

I latch my mouth onto her neck, leaving my mark behind, because if she's going to wear anyone's mark it's going to be

fucking mine. I work our hands over her clit until I slowly build her up, only to leave her hanging. Again. She bites into the palm of my hand, so I remove it from her mouth.

“Duke,” she pleads, and the way she says my name undoes me.

I smack her hand away, curling my own into the back of her hair as I bring her lips to mine and devour her. I thrust my fingers inside her pussy, my thumb working her clit until she’s clutching my shoulders, her body trembling against mine. Moans of ecstasy slipping against my tongue. She floods my hand with her sweet juices, leaving a stain on her bed.

“Holy fuck,” she whispers, looking up at me. “Please, tell me this isn’t a dream.”

“It is, I would never get my patient off,” I say gently, pushing her hair back.

She nods, dazed. “Of course.” Her body snuggles into mine and she drifts.

I’m suddenly hit with the thought that once again, anyone could have seen what we did. What the fuck am I even doing here? Did I just... Fuck.

God *fucking* dammit.

I climb off her bed, looking down at her small, sleeping form, rubbing my other hand over my face.

And I realize in that moment... I don’t care about the consequences. I’d do it again. And a-fucking-gain until I get her out of my goddamn head.



I GLARE AT NURSE MICK AS I GRAB MY COFFEE. HE SMIRKS, taking a sip of his own. Is it wrong that I hope he drops it all over himself, making him have to go home due to second-degree burns? There is something about this man that crawls under my skin. He’s the only one who volunteers to stay in the psych rooms with those we have to lock up. Is it a power trip?

This facility needs more people, not workers doing overtime. I do the work of two. Psychiatrists prescribe medicine, but since we have a lack of psychologists, I'm doing both. Not that I mind. Especially with a certain patient that is taking up a good portion of my mind while I try to crack into hers.

There is no explanation as to why I want to ruin my career over a patient. No reason to give up everything I've worked to become for one person, but she's... How do I explain this without wanting to give myself a psych evaluation? Desires turn into dark obsessions. And my desire is not only physical but also mental. I want to peek into her mind, see the darkness that lies there. I want to pour light into her soul, make her eyes sparkle with something more than a challenge. I want to fucking save her. From this place and from herself.

I walk to my office, my mind clouded. I snuck into her fucking room last night as if I belonged there. Obviously, I didn't. There was no reason for me to be there, no reason to have my fingers fucking her wet cunt, but I did, and I can't take that back now. There is no undo button in life. And if there was? I would fucking ignore it, because making my patient come has been my best experience in a long time.

I slam my door, leaning my back against it as I envision her tight little body wiggling against mine. *Fucking hell.*

I know about dark desires. How they consume you until you are nothing but your obsession and how it defines you. I know the only cure is to remove myself from the equation, but I don't want to. I want to drown in thoughts of my patient. My patient that may or may not be a killer.

Get it together, Duke, this isn't you.

I could request for someone else to take her on, wash my hands of her and be done, but the thought of someone else being her savior, putting light in her lifeless eyes, makes me murderous.

I want to be the one who owns her thoughts.

I shake my head. No, I don't. The fuck is wrong with me?

Chapter 11



I DO ENJOY SEEING her happy.

What I don't love is her reckless ability to ignore my warnings. As if they are empty threats and someone is just fucking around with her.

Oh, to be so delusional.

It's a shame because she is highly intelligent. She always has been. She just ignores everything she doesn't want to deal with. She's a fighter with a flight mentality.

I wish I could do the same, but someone has to protect *her*.

She walks around, taking care of everyone else's problems while ignoring her own. It's admirable if her life and sanity wasn't at stake.

I guess I'll just have to leave a final message before I take further action.

It's not as if I haven't warned her.



My mind is playing tricks on me.

I think it is, anyway.

Because why would my moody doctor come to me in the middle of the night and teach me how to get myself off? The short answer is, he wouldn't.

But I woke with an ache between my thighs, the feel of his fingers and mine moving deeply inside of me as he covered my mouth with his large hand and made me see so many stars, I fell asleep straight after. I've heard of wet dreams for women, but I've never experienced them myself.

The thoughts in my head are maddening, more so now that I've developed a sort of addiction to my doctor.

See why I say I'll never leave?

I knock on Doctor Novak's door, waiting for the gruff voice that hits every nerve in my body. It doesn't disappoint. I knew it wouldn't, but the effect still shocks me.

I enter the room, closing the door behind me and pausing as I lean against it. Seeing if I can read him like he reads me. His jaw tics, eyes cast down as he waits. And that's how I know—I know it wasn't a dream. He was in my room, playing with me last night, but he's hoping I think it was a dream.

“Doctor,” I say, walking and sitting on the couch across from him.

He rises, his stupid notepad clutched in his magical hands, the ones I can still feel all over my body.

“Miss Fawn.”

I laugh, a cruel smirk curling up my face like a villain. “Are we back to this, Doctor Novak? Formal last names like you didn’t make me come all over your fingers last night?”

He looks up under dark lashes, mossy eyes heating as he sits down in front of me in the armed chair across the couch. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No?” I raise an eyebrow. I let my fingers trail over my exposed thighs, brushing them over the hem of my t-shirt dress, slowly dragging it up to expose my bare pussy. “Remember now?”

He clenches his jaw and he looks away. “Pull your dress down, Miss Fawn.”

Instead, I spread my legs farther, running two fingers over my slick pussy. “Come on, Duke,” I rasp.

His eyes flash, watching me as I stroke myself. “What do you want?” he growls, his hand fidgeting by his side.

“Many things, but today I want to watch you.”

He pauses. “What?”

“You saw me vulnerable, now I want to see you. Show me how you please yourself, Doctor.”

“And if I don’t?”

I shrug, letting my finger fall away. “I could report you.” He opens his mouth to say something but I shake my head. “And before you say they won’t believe me, they’ll watch the cameras.”

“Blackmailing me? How clever.” He rises, walking to the door.

“Oh, no. Leave it unlocked. It makes it more... *venturesome*.”

He shakes his head, walking back toward me. My eyes widen as he pushes me back roughly against the couch. “Stupid girl. All you had to do was play with yourself three seconds longer and I would have given you what you wanted.” He unbuckles his pants, reaching inside and grabbing his thick, throbbing cock. “But since you blackmailed me, you’ll be getting me off now. Open your spiteful mouth and give me your serpent tongue.”

I gasp when he straddles me, gripping me by the throat and forcing his monstrous cock down my throat. Cutting off my oxygen. He smirks down at me. “Not so mouthy now, are you?” He presses deeper, making my eyes water.

“Look at you,” he rumbles from deep in his chest, “all full of my cock and giving me your unicorn tears. Heard you’ve never shed them, but look at you now. At my fucking mercy.”

He thrusts once and my eyes close. I’ve never done this before. He pulls out, the tip rubbing over my lips before he pushes back in, causing me to cough and sputtering around his cock. I feel saliva dripping from the corner of my mouth, sliding down my chin and onto my neck. He grunts, causing my eyes to open as his muscles strain in his arms as he clutches my throat. His head is thrown back, exposing his stubbled neck that I want to sink my teeth into.

And I realize, even though I’m not in control here, I am. Because it’s my throat making him this way, me making him lose his fucking mind. Just like he’s making me lose mine.

I run my tongue along him, and he moans huskily. “Good girl, butterfly. Keep doing that for me.”

My cheeks become pink at his words of praise, and I want to please him more for some reason. So, I suck and lick, hoping it feels amazing to him because I want... I want the praise, to make him happy.

I think I do a good job, judging by his grunts and moans of pleasure. Especially when he stiffens and a thick, salty liquid

slides down my throat. Waves and waves of pleasure rock his body as he bucks into me, and all I can do is hold on to the couch as he uses me.

His head drops and he pulls out of me, releasing my neck, which makes me sad. I don't know why.

“Good girl, butterfly,” he whispers, running his thumb over my cheek before climbing off of me.

He looks disheveled as he zips his pants back up, gathering himself into the perfect doctor role he has mastered. He sighs, sitting across from me again and laying his head back against the back of his chair. “Now, let's talk about the kidnappers.”

“I don't want to.” I cross my arms over my chest. Seems he's back to business, as per usual.

He lifts his head. “I gave you vulnerable, I expect you to repay me.”

Fuck.

I sit up straight, looking him in the eye. “What do you want to know?”

“I want your worst memory.”

I flinch, looking away. “Okay...” I whisper.

Sienna's wails play on a constant loophole. Sometimes I want to take her from this place, remove her from the situation we've found ourselves in. I just want her to stop crying. I lick my dry lips. “Leave my sister alone,” I yell with everything I have left in me.

The devil turns around, holding a belt in his hand as the camera blinks the red flashing light in their direction. “Your mouth never stops, does it, girl?”

I spit in his direction, and he laughs. Spinning, he sends the belt cracking down on my sister, the thwack of the leather against her skin makes me scream on the inside. Sienna cries, curling into a ball to protect herself from the metal of the belt.

The devil turns to me again, this time smiling. “I got something for you.” The camera is turned toward me, only his

hands visible. And then he's gone, walking up the stairs.

I let out a sigh of relief. "It's okay, Sienna. I'm going to get us out of here one day."

"I want to die." She sobs.

So do I, but I don't say that. "No way. You're going to get out of here and live the best life possible." She sniffs. "Now, I want you to go to your happy place, and no matter what you hear, stay there, okay?"

She sniffs again. "Okay."

She begins to hum, and it grows softer and softer until I know she's dissociated from this hellhole.

The door opens and I paint my soul in numbness as he walks closer, holding something in a metal pot. I don't react when he smiles. He hates when I do that; he likes our fear, which is why my sister is his go-to when he doesn't have time to deal with me.

He tips the pot, and at first, I'm shocked but then my brain registers the burns bubbling under the hot liquid. Hot, boiling water covers my skin, causing my mouth to open and a bloodcurdling cry to explode from my throat. My eyes squeeze shut as I scream. I keep screaming, feeling the whack of the belt against the tender skin of my right ribs. He doesn't stop, not until my eyes are rolling back and everything goes black.

I lick my lips after retelling the story, my eyes cast to where my mutilated flesh lays under my dress.

"Can I see it?"

My head snaps up. "My skin?" Doctor Novak nods.

I take a deep breath, standing and walking to him, slowly lifting the hem of my t-shirt dress until it hides my view of him. I feel his hand cupping my waist, feel the sweep of his finger over the uneven skin. And then I feel his breath, the way it lands on my skin, heating it. I feel the whisper of his lips against the scar before he's gone. "Ugly, right?" I say, hiding my emotions. My embarrassment flares at his professional ability to act as if I'm not practically flaunting my

pussy so close to his mouth. If he moved a millimeter down, he'd be eating me.

I wish we were doing that instead of examining old scars and talking about the childhood trauma I like to pretend doesn't exist.

"There isn't an inch of you that is ugly, Starlette," he whispers.

I block the emotions behind his words, pushing down the way they make me feel. The light, happy feeling is uncomfortable anyway.

Fuck this, and him. Why is he doing this to me?



"What is that?" Elena asks as I set the hair chalk out on the table in the rec room.

"My mom insists it's a fun way to express yourself. I think I may be too old for it, but you shouldn't be. You're still young."

Elena's mouth twists. "You're twenty-five."

"That's a quarter of a century," I point out. "And my life was spent in a cage for most of it."

Elena picks up the purple chalk, examining it. "Then why don't you ever let anyone help you?" she asks.

"I don't want help. I like being locked up, not having to make my own choices."

She makes a face. "Why?"

"Because it's all I've ever known. And this place is a vacation from my last *home*." I pick up the box, reading over whether it will work for dark hair. Says it will. Yeah, we'll see. "What colors do you want?" I ask, standing behind her.

"Purple and blue. And green. Like the galaxy."

I smile, grabbing the colors and beginning with the blue at the roots, then I add purple and then green. Elena's hair is short, so it doesn't take me long. She smiles, talking about how she never had any friends and that she's so glad she met me. I can't help but feel sad for her. Not sad that she didn't have friends but that she's been stuck with someone like me.

"What are you doing?"

I peer over to a sneering Nurse Mick. "Nothing."

He steps closer, so I block his view of Elena. "You know, I'm not sure those are allowed."

"Why? Think I can off myself with one? Maybe give myself chalk poisoning?" I fold my arms across my chest.

"We couldn't be so lucky."

What a cunt. How did he get a job here?

"Well, you can have them." I turn, placing them back into the box and smacking them into his chest.

His eyes, the beady little things, turn murderous. "Did you just assault me?"

I roll my eyes and Elena speaks up. "No, she didn't."

His attention turns to her, but I bring it back to me. "Do what you need to do, she's not part of this."

He smiles. "Assault means time-out, does it not?"

"You should have taken drama. I think you would have worked out better as a circus clown."

"That's it, Fawn. Let's go."

He grabs my shoulder and pushes me toward the door.

I was tired of peopling anyway.

Chapter 12



I TAP my pen on my notepad, looking down at my watch.

Where the fuck is she?

Sitting up, I grab my phone and call the nurse in charge of her floor.

“Hello?” she answers.

“Yes, this is Doctor Novak. I’m looking for Starlette Fawn. She’s late for her appointment.”

There is a rustle of papers before she speaks again. “She’s in the psych unit. Yesterday she reportedly assaulted a nurse.”

My jaw tics. “Which nurse?”

“Umm, that would be Nurse Mick, sir.”

“Does it say why she assaulted him?”

“Hair chalk?”

“Excuse me?”

She sighs. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

I rub my fingers into my temple. “Thank you.” I slam the office phone, then grab my personal phone and stuff it into my pocket.

When I get to the psych floor, I find Starlette fast asleep in a normal observation room this time. Mick walking up and down the hallway, peeking in on the patients.

“The fuck is she doing in here?”

Mick pauses, spinning to face me. “For assault, as usual.”

“Prove it.”

“W-what?” he stutters.

“I said,” taking a threatening step toward him. “Prove. It.”

“Well... I...”

“That’s what I thought.” I scan my badge to her room, push the door open, and walk in.

It takes a significant amount of control not to run my hand along her silky hair. “Wake up, Miss Fawn.”

Her eyes flutter open. “Doctor Novak?”

“Get up,” I command, pushing my hands into my pants pockets.

She rises, stretching her arms before following me out.

“Hold on a minute,” Mick says, but I cut him a cold glare that makes him stop in his tracks.

Starlette and I enter the elevator, watching the doors slide closed on a seething Mick. I turn to her. “Did you assault him?”

“If I got the chance to assault him, I would make it worth it.”

My lip twitches but I keep it under wraps. “I think you should file a report against him,” I suggest.

“It won’t make a difference. You think we haven’t?” She scoffs. “They’re too understaffed to get rid of him.”

She isn’t wrong. From what I’ve learned, she rarely is.

I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed seeing her face. Even if it’s been less than twenty-four hours. How she choked on my cock, taking my cum down her delicate throat.

And now I’m hard like a fucking teenager.

I press the emergency stop button, finding peace for the first time in the fact that this one doesn’t have a camera. Usually, it pisses me off.

Starlette’s eyes widen when the elevator comes to an abrupt stop. “What...” But I don’t let her finish her sentence as I attack her mouth with my own, slipping my hand down her tight little yoga pants. Surprisingly, she has on some satin panties today.

“You’re such a dirty girl, butterfly,” I rasp, cupping her pussy and squeezing lightly. “All wet like a bitch in heat and I’ve barely even touched you.”

I slip my fingers inside her, sucking on her neck, making sure my marks are the *only* ones she wears. I curl three fingers inside her, listening to her tiny pants as she fights the moan she’s holding in.

There is a buzzing sound, so I slap my free hand over her mouth. Looking down at her, I watch her every facial reaction as my eyes lower, and I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. She’s so beautiful. So intelligent. So mine.

“Excuse me. Is everything okay?”

I run my tongue up her neck, biting her earlobe. “Yes, this is Doctor Novak. The elevator seemed to have shut down on me.”

There is a crackling as I pull my fingers out of her, undoing my belt and pulling my zipper down. “Okay, hold tight, I’ll see what we can do to get you out of there.”

I lick my lips, smirking at Starlette. “Take your time.”

I shove her yoga pants down, grabbing one of her thighs and placing it around my waist. She watches me with curiosity. With my other hand, I thrust my hand in her hair, my lips finding hers as I plunge my tongue inside her mouth, loving the velvet texture of hers as I rub mine against it. And then, with more control than I possess, I sink inside her warm pussy. Not all the way, just my head. She gasps, her pussy walls clenching around me. It’s not fair to either of us, but I want to tease us both for a little bit.

I pump my head inside of her, over and over again. Watching as she gets off on just the tip. She’s fascinating. I watch her head fall back against the mirrored wall, but I grip her chin, forcing her to watch us from the side view. Leaning in close to her ear, I whisper, “Look at us, butterfly.”

She whimpers, her eyes dilating at seeing our reflection.

“You’re so fucking hot,” I growl, detangling my hand from her hair to pull down her shirt. I latch my mouth onto her breast, working my way up her chest to her neck, biting along her jaw. Her hands latch onto my shoulders, pussy spasming as she comes. My hand over her mouth keeping those moans in.

She looks exhausted when I push down on her head, falling to her knees. She parts her mouth to take me in, but I’m already coming all over her dazed face.

I run my hand over her hair. “Good girl, Miss Fawn.”



WE STEP OUT OF THE ELEVATORS, AND SHE FOLLOWS ME TO MY office, looking thoroughly fucked and so tired. I unlock the door, letting us in. She sits on the couch, snatching the knitted blanket off the back and curling up with it. “I don’t want to talk today.” She yawns.

“Not really how this works.” I sit at the other end of the couch, placing her feet in my lap. Why am I touching her at

all? I don't know, I just know I like to be near her for some reason. "Tell me a good memory you have."

"I don't," she huffs, turning her face into the couch cushion.

I work my thumbs into her foot. "You can't think of one?"

"How about this?" She turns to look at me. "You tell me one bad thing about your life. Your worst trauma, and I'll give you any memory, no matter how horrible or," she makes a mock gag face, "happy it is."

My hands still as a vision of midnight hair flashes in my mind. I clear my throat. "Okay. When I was seventeen, I had a girlfriend. Her name was Julia. She had beautiful tan skin with thick raven hair. Her eyes were like melted honey. She was my everything. My first. But she was sick." I let out a deep sigh. I'm the one in charge here, yet she has some sort of allure over me. I could wash my hands of her, she's more work than deemed necessary, but I can't let go. "She would go days without eating, she wouldn't get out of bed. She was always so sad, no matter what I did... I couldn't save her.

"One day after she missed school, I went to her house. She wasn't answering my calls that day and I was worried." I look out the window. "When I got there, I found her hanging from her ceiling fan, chin resting on her chest. And you know what, she never looked so peaceful as she did then... It was too late to save her."

"So now you save us," she finishes for me.

"Yeah. I guess so," I whisper.

"I guess that's a fair trade. What is it you want from me today? What piece of me can I give you?"

"I want to know about the murders."

She pauses. "I told you, I don't know what happened." She looks at me.

I sigh, pushing her legs off of me and rising. "Explain this to me," I say, frustration coating every inch of my words. I stand in front of her, her light eyes pleading. For what, I don't

know. “Two people were murdered. There was a total of four in the house that we know of. You were found next to two mutualized bodies; your sister was found downstairs. Explain to me how no one knows what happened in that house.”

She grits her teeth, eyes simmering with rage. “I will tell you what I’ve told the police. I remember falling asleep in the basement and waking up to a police officer peering over me,” she grits out.

“What am I supposed to believe when all arrows point to you?”

She stands, fisting her hands by her sides. “You’re supposed to believe me!” she screams. Emotion I’ve never seen from her crosses her face. Desperation. “I’ve opened up more to you than I have to anyone else. I’ve given you so many pieces of me that I didn’t want to acknowledge, but I did. I fucking trusted you...” Her voice breaks slightly at the end. “You are the only person I have trusted apart from my sister. And yet,” she looks away, shaking her head, “you still don’t believe me. You’re like everyone else.”

She begins to walk away, and something in my chest tightens.

“Wait.”

“No, I do not give second chances. You and I, Doctor Novak, are through here.” She slams the door behind her.

Fuck.



I SPEND THAT EVENING REREADING EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT Starlette Fawn. She had no damning evidence against her. And yet, my brain knows that, rationally, she is guilty. I don’t know how she covered up her crime or how she could fall asleep afterward, but I know there is no way she doesn’t know what happened.

I think about the pleading in her eyes, the desperation on her face as she basically begged for me to believe her. How

upset I made her and how I'm not sure I'll ever get that trust back from her.

I throw the file back in the drawer, slamming it shut. It's my job to be invested in my patients, but I know I've crossed too many lines with this one. I'm supposed to be supportive but not too attached. I'm not supposed to care this much.

Chapter 13



I SWING my legs in the nurse's office as she takes my temperature. She frowns at the thermometer. "You don't have a fever."

"I didn't think I did. I'm telling you my head throbs and the light is making it worse. I'm asking for a day in bed, in my dark room so my headache will go away."

She narrows her eyes at me. "Usually, I wouldn't believe someone with that claim, but you've only been in here when you're actually sick. So, I'm going to give you some pain medication and send you to your room for the day."

I wasn't lying, my head does throb. "Thank you," I say in appreciation.

“I’ll send an email to your floor’s nurse so she can let everyone else know, okay?”

“Sounds good.” I hop down from the medical bed, taking the medicine and swallowing it with a glass of water. I go back to my room, changing into some soft pajamas and laying down in my bed. I stare out the window, watching the rain behind the metal bars.

I think back to yesterday.

I’ve never cared if anyone believed me, but I wanted him to. He said he saw me, but he lied. He sees what everyone else sees.

A killer.

A liar.

A psychopath.

I’ve never given anyone any reason to think differently, but I did to him. Did Doctor Novak truly think I enjoyed pulling up memories I buried as soon as they happened? I still don’t know why I did it. To go outside on a rainy day? No.

I sigh, turning my wandering mind off the subject. Focusing on trying to make my headache lessen. So, I close my eyes.

The lady that goes by Momma stands above me, her eyes crinkled with sadness. “Why do you aggravate Father?” she asks, sinking to the dirty ground in front of me.

“Why do you stay with him?”

She purses her lips, lifting my shirt gently as it sticks to the burn. I bite my tongue as the shirt pulls on the wound. “This is the only home I have ever known. There have been more, but he chooses to keep me. So, I stay. I behave and he rewarded me with my very own children.”

She runs mild soap over the burn, and I inhale in a sharp breath. She runs water over it next, washing the soap off, and I close my eyes, body tensing with so much pain I don’t dare breathe. “Where are the others?” I ask.

She hums, putting ointment on the wound and covering it in gauze. "They got too old. I don't know where he takes them, just that they are not here anymore."

Chills erupt up and down my spine. "They just... disappear?" I ask.

She nods, pulling my shirt back down. "But I won't let that happen to you, One. Or Two. You are my babies. He won't take you away from me, he promised." She smiles, handing me a bottle of water. "Be a good girl for Momma, okay? I don't like seeing you hurt."

"Do you know what he does down here? To us?"

She stands, biting on her lip, avoiding eye contact at all costs. "Yes," she whispers.

"Then you know he hurts us?" I state.

"Everyone is treated the same." She smiles.

I realize it's useless. This woman is too traumatized to understand this isn't normal.

She walks away, and I hear Sienna humming. "Ring Around the Rosie". It's her go-to. Her favorite nursery rhyme. "Sienna, please, not right now. I want to sleep," I protest, but she doesn't hear me. She keeps humming in her delusion. I've learned since being down here that she's slowly losing it.

I can't tell you how long we've been down here, but by the way our hair has grown, how our faces are aging, and our bodies are slowly developing, I would say it's been more than two years. Not to mention the fact that we bleed once a month now. I look forward to those days because he doesn't come down here. Says it's our week of peace even though it's anything but.

"Do you think Mom and Dad are still looking for us?" Sienna startles me by asking.

"I'm sure they are," I say to soothe her worrying. I don't know if they are or if they have given up by now. Though I hope they haven't.

She grows quiet and I let my mind wander. It's hard to stay positive in a place so dark I can't see my hand in front of my face. Only inhaling musty dust. To take both mental and physical torture day after day. If my sister wasn't still holding on, I would find a way to end it. To escape this miserable excuse of a life. I long to drift between worlds. To feel the freedom of my wings.

I speak it into existence every day. And every day I wake up to darkness.

Sienna begins to hum again, and I let the haunting tune of her voice rock me to sleep.



I WAKE WITH A START, A SHADOWY FIGURE OVER MY BODY.
“What?”

“I just came to check on you,” Elena says, laying a sandwich on my desk.

“I’m fine, I just have a terrible headache today.”

She nods. “I know, I just wanted to see for myself.”

“Thanks for checking on me, Elena. I appreciate it.”

She runs her hands over her sweatpants. “Thanks for taking the hit for me yesterday.”

“It was my chalk; therefore, it was my hit to take. No need to thank me.”

She glares. “Take a compliment.”

I laugh. “Yeah, okay.”

She does a quirky little curtsy and then leaves my room. I laugh to myself, walking over to my desk. I grab the sandwich and unwrap it. Taking a huge bite, I pause mid-chew. My hand reaches down, and I grab the white envelope, unfolding the paper inside it.

DEAR S,

You don't remember, but I do. Your perfect little bubble is going to pop soon.

–P

I THROW THE SANDWICH DOWN, CRUMPLING THE PAPER IN MY hand. I storm down the hall, almost managing to avoid running into my doctor as he tries to stop me. “Move, I do not have time for you today.”

He does, not trying to follow me. I walk into the phone room, happy to see it is empty. I grab the phone, dialing the number I know from heart that I've dialed so many times over the years.

“Hello?” My mother's soothing voice answers on the first ring.

“Mom.”

“Star, sweetheart, how are you—”

“I want to speak to her,” I cut her off.

“Well, Starlette, you can't because...”

“Because she's too busy with her normal life while I'm stuck here? Well, you tell her I got her messages, and I want her to stop fucking with me. I know what P stands for.” I slam the phone down, storming out of the phone room.

P as in Polka.

It's what we called each other. Me Dot, her Polka. Because Mom always dressed us in fucking polka dots.

I've got you now, Sienna.

Chapter 14



SHE WON'T LOOK at me, won't speak. She plays with her socks as she stares at the ground while sitting on my couch. I fucked up, I know that. There is no evidence against her, I should have been professional. But the thing about being around my butterfly? All my training goes out the fucking window.

“Butterfly...” I murmur. “Talk to me.” I am not a patient man, never have been, but the intensity of my patience seems to heighten when it comes to her.

“I’m not required to talk to you.” She picks at her nails.

“Yes, you are. That’s the whole point of this.”

“Then refer me to someone else.”

I grit my teeth, breathing hard through my nose. “No. You’re my patient. *Mine.*”

She laughs at that. “Does the possessive, alpha thing usually work for you?”

I smirk, finally having gotten a response from her. “Come let me taste your pussy and I’ll let you know.”

She swallows. “You’re very crass for a respected doctor.” She pauses, looking to me. “Very seductive for a man who believes I murdered two people.”

She’s not wrong. I hadn’t meant to come on to her, but it seems to be working in my favor. She’s speaking to me now. “Can’t help what I crave, sweetheart.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Do I come across sweet to you, Doctor? Or that I even have a functioning heart? Because if so, I seemed to have led you on.”

“I think you have a heart buried deep down in that dark aesthetic of yours,” I muse.

“You think wrong.”

I know it’s not, but banter with her feels like foreplay. “I just want to help you, butterfly.”

“I never asked to be saved,” she whispers.

I ponder this, studying her as she gets lost in her head. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I should have believed you.”

She nods. “But you didn’t. Just like everyone else.”

“I know.” I rise, moving closer to her. I cup her chin in my palm, turning her head to face me. “Give me another chance.”

“Why should I bend my rules for you?” she questions.

“Because I see you.”

She licks her lips. “Do you?”

I nod, placing a soft kiss to the corner of her cheek. “This may be hard for you to believe, but I care about you.”

“Too bad I care about nothing. You are forever destined to fall for women who are fatal.” Her words hit right where she

wanted them to.

“Not this time.” And I mean it. She won’t have the same ending as Julia.

She jerks her head from my hand, looking at the clock. “Time’s up, Doctor.” And then she rises, leaving me wondering what the hell I’m going to do.



STARLETTE IS OFTEN SEEN AS EGOTISTICAL, BUT I’M NOT SO sure that is the case here. I think we spent so much time making her out to be the bad guy—the bad guy she became to be. I think she may have been misdiagnosed.

I’ve studied her, watched emotions play across her face. A psychopath would never show vulnerability. It’s not something they can feel, let alone express. What if she has been playing us the whole time?

I dig through my notes, finding the written notes from when she first arrived.

Dissociated.

Altered reality.

Numb.

Anxious.

Denial of the trauma.

I believe she may have simply turned her emotions off. Blocked a decade of her life out.

And I just fucked her trust in me all to hell.

I sigh, throwing the file back in the drawer for the dozenth time.

I’ve never had a problem with having feelings for my patients. And you would be surprised at how many will try to seduce you, whether it be for certain medication or just loneliness. That’s the delusion about someone who finally

understands you and helps you build yourself back up, you sometimes get mixed feelings. But this time around, it's me. I'm the one with mixed feelings.

She is the personification of dark. My desire has led to an unhealthy obsession. I want to break her, but not the way she has already been broken. I want to save her, not fix her. Rationally, I know something is wrong. she needs help, but the other doctors have never seen her dull eyes flash with light. Heard the sweet pleasure of her moans. Devoured the soft flesh of her lips. They've never seen her transform like I have.

They never saw the different shades of her butterfly wings like I have.

Chapter 15



DOCTOR LAWRENCE LOOKS at me disapprovingly when I refuse to participate in today's lesson on how to be normal in a world of weirdness.

“What is going on with you today, Starlette?”

I shrug. “No one ever believes me. Not that I care, but I don't see the point in trying if everyone has already written me off.”

“Is this about the killings?”

I stiffen. “Do you believe I killed them as well?”

Her lips twist and she stays silent. That's answer enough, so I rise.

“Starlette, please.” But I ignore her, walking right out of her office with zero regards of how that makes her feel.

I bump into Duke in the hallway, but I dismiss him with a single glare. Or that’s what I hoped to do, but instead he drags me into a dark hallway. “Starlette.” He basically growls my name. His eyes hard in anger. “I understand why you’re mad at me, but that doesn’t change anything between us.”

I shake my head. “There is *nothing* between us.”

He gets up in my space, body trembling with rage. “If you truly believe that then you are delusional.”

“Back up before I make a scene.”

His face softens, and he attempts to cup my cheek, but I let out a bloodcurdling scream, alerting anyone close by in the facility.

He takes a step back, hands going to his pockets as his mask of indifference and boredom falls into place.

“You having trouble with this one? Should I take her to the psych floor?”

Duke looks over to Mick the Dick, eyes so dark I almost don’t recognize him. “You stay the fuck away from her if you want to keep your pathetic life.”



THERE IS AN ACHE BETWEEN MY THIGHS. AN URGE SO INTENSE I have to bite my lip to suppress the whine that threatens to break from my lips. My cheeks heat as I walk down the hallway, hoping to find somewhere private, away from people and cameras. I can’t go back to my room. That would call attention to me. But I have to fix this ache.

I look both ways, slowly slipping into the theater room. It’s dark with only small lights hanging from the wall, casting a dim glow. I walk to the middle of the row of joint seats, falling into one and lowering my body until my head can’t be seen if anyone passes by.

I kick my loose sweats to my knees, hastily pulling my panties to the side. My fingers sink into my embarrassingly wet heat. The wetness slides down my fingers like honey, warm and sticky. I arch into the seat, trying to get my small fingers to hit that spot Duke did the other night. It's useless. I close my eyes and let out a soft whimper as I try to give myself the release my body so desperately entreats for.

"Patience, butterfly," a voice rumbles.

My eyes open wide and I almost moan at just the sight of Duke. "Please," I whisper.

He tilts his head. "Please? Please what, sweetheart?"

"I need... I need you." I moan softly.

"Yeah?" he rasps.

I nod beseechingly. "Yes."

He drops in front of me, his strong hands tug my sweatpants and panties off, tossing them to the side. He widens my legs, opening me up to his dark, hungry gaze. "Look at you," he murmurs, swiping his fingers through the mess I'm making. "She's so pink and hungry." He looks up, green eyes clashing with my icy grays. "I see the game of manipulation is mine this time."

"Whatever you want," I breathe.

"You."

"Me?"

He nods, placing a kiss on the inside of my knee. "I want your words, your thoughts, your story. I want to know everything about you. The real you. The mask of your persona is cracking, butterfly."

I swallow, not liking what he's saying to me. But a little relieved someone wants to know me for me and not the psychopath they say I am.

Just me.

"Okay," I whisper.

“You are so starved of basic human affection.” He places a kiss to my mound and my head falls back into the seat as his voice teases over me. “Mind so malnourished of kind words.” He licks through me, causing my body to shiver. “I don’t want to clip your wings like those before me,” he murmurs. “I want to paint your wings and show you how to fly.”

“Yes,” I moan. It’s like since I was taken, I’ve waited for this moment. For someone to understand me. To heighten the world around me and teach me to hone my true self. It feels like I’ve waited forever to be seen. But this scares me, because what if who I am is just as toxic as how everyone sees me?

“You don’t scare me, Starlette.” It’s like he’s constantly peeking into my brain, taming my thoughts with his words and touch.

Finally, he lays his mouth over my clit, sucking it between his lips and pressing his tongue against my center. His fingers enter me, and I’m coiled tighter than I was when we started. He curls them into the soft spot I couldn’t reach.

A soft moan falls from my lips and I look down to watch him, running my fingers through his soft, thick, stygian hair. My mouth falls open on a silent gasp when his eyes look up to me. Dark desire, borderline obsession reflecting back as he watches me. Like he’s possessed by my taste alone.

I’m getting lost in his touch, the way he thrusts his magical fingers inside of me and how his tongue swipes every drenched inch of me, when the door behind us opens, casting a streak of light on the projection screen in front of us.

I stiffen, but Duke’s hand comes up, covering my mouth as he begins fucking me harder with his mouth, his eyes never leaving mine as he gets me off. My eyes roll back, pussy clenching around his thick digits in a vise-like grip. He slows his licks as I come. Lazily cleaning me up as the door finally closes behind us, casting us back in the dim light.

He kisses the inside of my thigh, gently biting the skin there and sucking. “The first color I’m painting your wings is red and purple. Like the marks I plan to leave on your body.” I

shudder. “Be in my office on time today, sweetheart. Don’t make me hunt you down.”

He rises, but I grab his tie, pulling our lips close but not touching. “This won’t end well, you know that, right?”

“I’m willing to risk it,” he whispers.

“We can never be together, so why start something that will only end in despair?”

“Sometimes the things that seem impossible are the things that give us life, butterfly. You breathe life into me.”

And then he’s gone, leaving me alone in the dark room as I try to calm my racing heart.

I might breathe life into him, but it’s him who makes me want to live.



I MAY HAVE MOMENTARILY LOST MY MIND WITH MY DOCTOR’S tongue buried between my thighs, but now that the fog has cleared, I remember how he didn’t believe me. And I won’t be letting him off that easy.

But before I go to his office, I stop by to use the phone. I listen as it rings on the other end. This is an odd time for me to call home, but maybe Mom is in. I won’t lie and say that I know her schedule.

“Hello?”

“Mom.”

A pause, and then, “Starlette, honey. I’m so happy you called. I didn’t like the way we left things.”

A tiny prick of guilt soon evolves into nothing. Because I refuse to let it. “Yeah. I was wondering if I could come home for the weekend...”

“Of course. I can come get you now or...”

“Oh, no,” I cut her off, batting away the nervous butterflies in my stomach. “If you call and sign me out, I can catch the bus. Honestly, Mom, it’s no big deal.”

“Well, if you insist.”

“Thanks, Mom. I... I love you.”

I can hear the smile in her voice as she says, “I love you too.”

The line goes dead, and I have to fight the stupid smile that tries to take over my face.

I exit the room, walking to Doctor Novak’s office. Yes, I just made a very irrational decision, but if Sienna won’t come see me, I’ll just have to go to her.

I have questions. I’m not lying, I have no idea what happened that night, but she does.

Not only that... Is it so wrong for me to want to know how she’s doing? To see if she healed properly. Ask what I have done to warrant the silent treatment all these years? All I have ever done is protect her.

Pain explodes behind my eyes as something smashes me in the back of the head. I stumble forward, catching myself on the wall as my vision blurs. But as I look beside me, I catch Mick smiling, his hand reaching out before my sight is gone.



THE WOMAN I CALL MOMMA RESTS BESIDE ME, ONCE AGAIN cleaning up my wounds. It took me a while to figure out what is going on here, but I finally got her to tell me. He takes videos of himself inflicting pain upon us and then sells them on the dark web. Apparently, that’s a thing. It only highlights my thoughts on the world outside of these walls. It’s sick.

“How many more of us are there?” I ask Momma as she stitches up my arm. Hurts like a mother, but I’ve become so used to hiding my pain I don’t even flinch.

She purses her lips. "As of right now, it's just you two, but he did have a few others last week."

"And what happened to them?"

She shrugs. "Like always, they leave."

I fight the nausea in my stomach. Maybe she is stupid or has blocked it all out, but I doubt they just get to go back home. Unlike her, I know when he's done with me, he'll kill me. There will be no returning home for me.

I let my thoughts fade to nothing as I listen to Sienna sing her stupid comforting nursery rhyme.



I shake my head. She never listens, and now, yet again, I'm going to have to clean up her mess.

I look down to Nurse Mick as he squirms away from me. I'm sick of watching him fuck with her.

He's gagged and hog-tied. Looking as if he's about to piss his pants. Wish I could stick around for that. Walking over to him, I sink my foot into his balls, and he screams behind his gag. It makes me smile as I walk away.

Now, it's time to go save Starlette. Not only save her, but make her remember everything.

Chapter 16



I LOOK out the window of my office, watching the rain pound into the ground as the sky casts an ominous shadow. I listen as the door opens behind me, the soft echo as it closes. I turn to see her, but something is off.

“Hello, Doctor Novak.” Her eyes have shifted, her tone slightly sharper. She comes closer, a grin painted on her face, eyes wide and manic, and it finally clicks in my mind what everyone has missed.

Starlette pulls out a Taser she must have pinched off a nurse. “Let’s go, Doctor.” She nods her head to the door.

I swallow, walking over to my desk as she watches my every move with calculated eyes. I grab my keys and phone, stuffing them into my pockets and rounding the desk, walking

to the door. She follows me close behind as we make our way out the back entrance of the facility. You need your key card to get through it, yet no one even bats an eye, too busy looking over charts or their phones to look up. If they did, they'd notice the subtle taps of my fingers on my thighs. Something we were taught during training if we are being held against our will. But they don't pay attention to us.

We make it outside, and I lead us to my SUV. "Get in the passenger seat," she demands as I unlock the car.

My heart pounds as I climb in. I'm not usually scared of Starlette but in this state of mind, she is the definition of dangerous and unpredictable. She climbs into the driver's seat, adjusting the seat and mirrors as if she's done this before. Maybe she has, but I find it unlikely. And then slowly she turns, manic eyes meeting mine right before she stabs a needle in my neck.

And everything begins to fade.

She fucking sedated me.

My only hope is they notice she is missing and that I am too.



MY EYES FLASH OPEN, ROUNDING IN PANIC AS WE MAKE OUR way to the outskirts of town, the stench of nicotine clogging my nostrils as I struggle against my restraints.

I look over to Starlette, who has a cigarette hanging between her lips, the window down as she stares out the front windshield, tapping her free hand on the steering wheel.

I try to lick my way through the duct tape on my mouth, but my tongue is so parched from the sedative she gave me earlier.

She flicks the cigarette out the window, reaching over to take the tape off my mouth. "Not as glorified as you think it is."

“What?”

“Sedatives, they fucking suck. The headaches, the way your mouth feels as if you have a thousand cotton balls inside it.”

I don't reply right away. I just watch her, trying to see what I'm dealing with. “Butterfly?”

She laughs lightly. “She's asleep.”

My stomach sinks as what I figured out comes to light. “You're an alter.”

She cackles, her accent thick as she speaks. “An alter? No, I'm her fucking protector.”

“How long have you been with her?”

“Since she was seven.”

“And you stayed hidden?”

She scoffs. “No, but she was so young. Time in the basement was a standstill. She never knew how long she was asleep because time never moves forward in there. No light from the outside world. No new smells of flowers and fresh grass to indicate the changing of seasons. It was all simply the same, the days blending together until it turned into years. She never knew.”

“Will you tell me her past? No one has any history on her.”

She looks over to me, jaw ticking. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I need to protect her.”

“Then why did you take me? Why not just escape as you always do.”

“Because she seems to trust you.”

I let that sink in. Try to remember that even though the person I am talking to looks like Starlette, it isn't her. It's a mindfuck, but I'm trained for this. “How many of you are there?”

“Just me.”

I pause, shaking my head. “Do you know the statistics of a person only having one alter?” It’s extremely rare. Only a few cases have ever been reported.

She pretends to think about it. “No, and I don’t care. All I care about is getting her to a safe place.”

“What do you mean? What brought you out this time?”

Her jaw tics. “Nurse Mick. He was attacking her, and I put her to sleep and handled him.”

“Did you...” I trail off.

“Kill him?” She laughs, shaking her head. “No, but I should have.”

“You know they will be looking for you—her, right?”

“They won’t. Starlette called her mom before she was attacked. Asked to spend the weekend at home. And I stopped by the house on my way. Told them she wanted to soul-search for a while and to withdraw her from that god-awful place. So, no, Doctor, no one will be looking for her.” She looks over, a chilling smile plastered to her face. “Just you.”

And then she’s quiet, piloting the car until we turn down a familiar driveway, my home hidden behind trees coming into view. And when she parks and looks over to me, she winks, before hopping out of the car.



I SIT ON MY BED THAT STARLETTE SLEEPS PEACEFULLY IN. MY mind working overtime as I try to process everything. It’s one thing for it to be a patient, but for someone I’m somewhat involved with, it hits differently. The shocking reality of watching her talk as someone else was... I don’t want to say scary because I wasn’t scared. I was... concerned more so.

Starlette startles, her wide eyes flashing in panic as she pulls on her hands that are restrained to my headboard. She blinks at the unfamiliar room around her, taking in the deep

shades of black and gray. The unpersonal feel of it all. I don't have a single thing on the walls. My entire house is like this.

I'm the definition of 'money can't buy you happiness.' I have more than I know what to do with and yet, I stay at the on-site apartments.

Starlette looks to me, so confused and maybe a little scared. So different than the aloof woman I am used to. I trace my thumb over the curve of her cheek. Looking down at her thoughtfully. "I can't believe I didn't see it, that no one saw it."

"Saw what?" She blinks up at me, face moving into my palm. I'm not sure she knows she's even doing it.

"You. Her. You're one in the same, but different."

"What?"

"You've been misdiagnosed."

"How?"

"You have traumatic split personality disorder," I say carefully, trying not to spook her. "Well, they call it dissociative identity disorder these days. It's when a person has two or more sets of thoughts, actions, and behaviors, each of which may be completely different."

"No..." She shakes her head. Denial written all over her face, and I get it. How does one accept that? Hell, I'm a damn doctor and I'm still having a hard time coming to terms with it.

"I would like to run some tests on you, if that's okay?"

"How about you untie me first? Can we start there, Doctor Novak?" She's angry, refusing to look at me.

I sigh, unclipping the leather bands around her wrists. She sits up, rubbing her temples. "Where are we?"

"My home."

She raises her eyebrows. "Did you kidnap me?" Her eyes close, her hand going to the back of her head. "The last thing I remember is being attacked by Nurse Mick, how..." She lets a

frustrative groan out. “Why does this keep happening?” she asks herself, but I answer for her.

“Because your alter takes over, that’s why you experience the loss of time. Why you wake up in strange places. Why when I met you the first time, you didn’t even remember.”

She shakes her head. “You’re wrong.” She stands, going to my en suite and closing the door behind her. I hear the shower turn on and lie down.

Fuck.



Numb.

The feeling is so familiar, it's almost comforting. Like my own personal safe place.

Confusion.

A constant state of mind I can't escape.

I watch Duke as he walks around his home examining room. He has everything a doctor should, and I want to ask him... why? But I don't care. Because I think he may be right. Someone else lives in my mind. I've always known that, but I've hidden it from my own conscience because the thought alone is fucking scary. To know at any moment, it can take over my mind, my body, and act of its own accord without my knowledge. With no remembrance of what it did.

Fuck that and fuck this. I was better off not knowing.

And then he does the last thing I want. Duke taps his desk in a succession of three. I moan, trying to fight it, but as always, the corners of my vision blur into smoky edges.

And then there is nothing.

Chapter 17



SHE BLINKS RAPIDLY as if coming out of a daze. She looks around the room, one eyebrow raised. “You rang?”

It seems they both share the same smart-ass mouth. I’ll give them that. “What do I call you?” I ask, folding my hands behind my back.

“Protector.”

I hum. “I want to fuse you two into one. Would you fight that?”

She shakes her head. “No, but could you love me as you do her? Because even the bad parts that I am will become her. Are you prepared for that?”

I swallow, the L-word hitting my chest hard. Of course, her alter would notice before she does. “I can love every version of Starlette. No matter what.”

Protector watches me and then nods. “Okay, what do we need to do?”

“She has to heal. She has to remember.” I sigh, running my hands through my hair. “I have to take her back to that house, and you have to give her access to your memories.”

She nods. “I can do that. I’ve been leaving her little notes on her desk, hinting that this was coming. I’m ready to see my girl live. I’m tired of her being locked up.” She pauses. “Do you have any idea the pain she is going to experience when I allow her into my memories? Are you prepared to pick up the pieces and glue them back together? You have no clue what she has been through, Doctor. And she only knows barely a quarter of it.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, nodding. “I’ve got her.”

She sighs, her eyes tired. “Then I’ll give her back to you.”

She blinks rapidly and anger simmers in my favorite blue-gray eyes. “Do not do that without my permission again, Duke.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” I walk closer to her, allowing her to track my movements. Once I reach her, I bend my head, my lips connecting with hers.

She pushes on my chest. “I’m still mad.”

“About what?” I know exactly what, but she needs to voice her thoughts if we can gain the trust back.

“The list is so long at this point!”

I chuckle. “I bet it is.”

She grows quiet, searching my eyes. “What is it like?”

I think she calls her *it* because she doesn’t want to humanize her alter even though she already has subconsciously.

I lick my lips. “You, but harder. Her only purpose is to protect you.”

I allow her to ponder that. “What is my next move here, Duke? I... I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“I want to fuse you two together. But first, you need to heal in order to remember. Are you ready for that?”

She shakes her head frantically. “I need to see my sister and—”

I shush her, laying her head against my chest so she’ll calm down. “You can do that after. Okay?” She nods against my shirt. “But we’re going to have to go back to that house.”

“Okay...” she whispers hesitantly.

“But let’s do something first. Something you’ve always wanted to do but have never got to.”

Chapter 18



THE SKY IS clear out here. Wherever *here* is. Out in the middle of the woods in a giant modern home. It's made of windows and stone. Duke's home, I presume. Not sure why he would ever leave it. We lay on the roof, a pallet of thick blankets and fluffy pillows surrounding us. I've always wanted to do this. Watch the stars from the roof while lying under a pile of blankets. I always imagined I'd be alone when I finally knocked this off my bucket list. Never in a million years would I imagine my doctor with me or anyone other than my sister.

But it's nice, not being alone. Even if we are not touching or even talking. Just absorbing the stars and the full moon. The sky is like a blanket of stars. Some big and some small, twinkling, while others just exist. I've never seen so many.

I try to ponder this, try to focus on the sight above me instead of the fact that I am not one. But I can't. And I just want to make it all stop.

“Can you... can you just make it stop? Please.” My voice breaks off as I try to keep the tears at bay.

“What do you want me to do, butterfly?”

“Take it all away. Be my medication and cure me. If only for a minute.”

He appears over me, arms braced next to my head as he stares down at me, searching my eyes. Dark hair a delicious mess. “I should be a better man and walk away. As your therapist, I know this is wrong.” I swallow the lump in my throat. Wanting to grab ahold of his shirt and drag him closer. Tie my legs around his waist so he can't leave me. “But I can't.”

His lips smash to mine, all tongue and teeth. Reckless and out of control. I could taste his mint gum, the slight hint of black tea on his lips. Intoxicated by his woody scent as his body lowers, his strong weight pinning me to the roof. I love it, his weight on me. The feel of him everywhere. Well, almost. Every time he touches me, I can feel the warmth of his light drowning out my darkness.

His hand drifts up my shirt, fingertips lightly brushing my warm skin, skimming their way up my rib cage, pulling the hem along the way. My breathing slows as my eyes connect with his. They're dark, almost bottomless, as he looks down at me. I lift my hands, helping him remove my shirt so I'm left in my tights and bra. His eyes sear into my skin, leaving behind phantom touches as he takes me in. And that's when I see it. The possession in his gaze. The sight makes my breath catch in my throat, my body trembling with want—no, need. The need for him to touch me. Devour me. His hands tremble, not with nervousness but barely-contained animalistic needs, the need to destroy what lies between him and me—my tights. The material rips like cheap fabric, barely holding on at the bottom around my ankles. And the snap of panties has me

gasping, eyes wide as I watch him, strong and powerful above me.

“Look at her,” he rasps as he runs his knuckles between my folds. “She’s so fucking messy for me.”

The way my body reacts to his words catches me off guard. The way my pussy flutters and grips nothing. The noises that come from me are embarrassing. I’ve never felt this turned on in my life.

He shifts, rising to grab the back of his shirt and pulling it over his head. And holy fucking abs. Rows and rows, all taut and tempting my tongue for a taste. He’s as beautiful as a sculpted god. The defined lines of that V with dark, perfectly groomed hair that trails down, disappearing behind his sexy gray sweatpants. Don’t ask me why, but I feel as if they are the equivalent to a woman’s miniskirt. Dangerously tempting. Not only that, but the way they carve out his thick length that grows before my eyes, that should be illegal.

I allow my eyes to travel up, feasting on the thick, corded muscles of his broad shoulders, over his neck, to his thick arms that ripple with each movement. Who knew all of *that* was hidden under dress shirts and sweaters.

I want to unwrap him like a gift, but I get the feeling I’m not in control here. He is.

“If you’re done eye-fucking me…” My eyes snap up to his. The glitter with amusement while I feel my cheeks heat a thousand shades of red and pink. “Pull me out.”

I lick my lips, hands shaking as I reach for the waistband of his sweats, my hands slipping beneath them and grasping his thick length. It’s huge, I know that, but getting to feel it in my hands is only proving my theory. He was massive fucking my throat and he’s just as big between my fingers. I’m not sure this thing was made to fit inside of another body, if I’m honest.

“Now, play with yourself with it.”

“What?” I blink up at him.

“You heard me. Use me like I used you in my office. Go on, butterfly.”

I bend my knees, pulling on the drawstring of his sweatpants so he falls back over me, his thick cock slapping against my entrance. With shaking hands I begin to rub him over my folds. It's different, the velvet skin sliding through me, hitting my clit and making me jump. I do it again, harder this time. My head rolling back as I rub his tip against my clit. Over and over again. My mouth falls open on a silent moan, my eyes flashing when a strong hand wraps around my throat and Duke's tongue runs over my parted lips. His other hand guides my own and his cock to my entrance, barely breaking through the opening.

My breath catches as I stare up at him. His hand around my throat, eyes hooded in pleasure as he looks down at me. "Ready to play, Doctor?"

He chuckles, thrusting deep inside of me, and I gasp, not ready for the intrusion. "I'm always ready to play with my favorite patient. Now, take my cock like a good girl, let me hear those siren-like moans."

But all I can do is whimper as I clench around him, my nipples hardening under the fabric of the bra. I need it off.

As if he can read my thoughts, he yanks it down, allowing my heavy breasts to become free. His hand leaves my throat in favor of my hair, which he yanks back, causing my back to arch, my neck exposed to him and my breasts pressing into his chest. His free hand grips the side of my ass, squeezing as he plows into me. Hitting me so deep, I feel him in my stomach. Fuck, I feel him everywhere. His teeth in my neck, his weight on top of me.

"You're a fucking mess, butterfly," he grunts into my ear. "My beautiful mess."

He flips us, me straddling his lap now, hand no longer buried in my hair. And I just look down at him. I'm not that experienced. I've never rode on top. But he doesn't seem to care, because with both hands full of my ass, he bounces me up and down on his dick. Hitting deeper than before, which I didn't even know was possible. My moans and whimpers are loud and uncontrolled. My thighs slick and my pussy making

these embarrassing loud, wet noises. And when he puts his mouth on my nipple, teeth clamping on the peak, I fall. Body shaking as wetness pools between the two of us. It's better than any pain pill, any high from a downer. It's fucking addicting. This feeling of warmth washing over my body in waves as he bucks up into me. And when I hear his gruff moan, his warm seed imbedding itself inside me, I know nothing will ever compare to this moment.

I collapse into his arms, his dick half-mast inside me as I lay on his chest. And I must fall asleep because when I come to, we are in his room, my back against the wall as he fucks me again.

We don't get any sleep, trying new surfaces and erasing any doubt or worry I have in my head. Because when I do finally fall asleep, Duke wrapped around me as we watch the sunset from his bed, all I see is black.

Chapter 19



SHE'S GODLIKE. Long copper hair that flows to her feet, pale skin dotted in angel-kissed freckles. She watches me from a stone bench, green eyes tracking me. Her face is void of any emotion. I look around, but there is nothing to see. It's like we're in a floating cloud and the only thing is her and me. And that stone bench.

"Where are we?"

She tilts her head. "Our inner world. It's the spot in your mind we can both exist at once."

"You're so familiar and yet, I don't know you."

She smiles softly. "You chose not to, and that's okay. Are you ready to know what happened that night?"

A pain in my chest flares and I bite my lip to suppress it.
“Yes.”

“Well, you better wake up then.”

“Wake up, butterfly. We’re here.”

I open my eyes, taking in the run-down home in front of me. I’ve never seen the outside. Even when I was first brought here, I had a blindfold on. And after the police found me, I just didn’t want to look at it. Didn’t want an image of what the outside of my cage looked like. But seeing it now, it doesn’t look all that scary. The broken windows no one cared to board up. The kicked-in front door and the discoloration of the old panel. The rotted front porch that’s one gust of wind away from collapsing. Even so, my chest is tight as I remember *his* face. Sienna’s cries and humming. *Her* oblivious to what was going on around her own surroundings but the deep love she held for my sister and me.

She didn’t deserve to die.

“Yes, she did.”

The voice in my head startles me for a second before I shake it off.

“Are you ready to go in?” Duke asks, gently touching my arm.

“Yeah,” I grab my bag, opening the door. “Let’s do this.”

I step out of the car, letting the cool air whip my wild hair over my eyes. I take a deep, shuttering breath. “Did they ever find the others?” I ask.

“They found close to eighty young girls buried in the backyard. One of biggest serial killer cases in history. Some of the victims have never been identified,” Duke informs me, snatching my purse and pulling a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out.

“You smoke?” I ask.

He inhales, slowly releasing it. “No.”

“Wait, why do I have cigarettes?” I take one from him, perching it on my lips as he leans over to light it with the Zippo.

“Ask your alter. She smoked in my car.”

I want to laugh, but the reality of where we are comes back to me. “Eighty?”

“Yeah. The fresher ones, for lack of a better word, were all extremely malnourished and beaten.” He flicks the ash, leaning back against his car as we both stare at the house of horrors. “The skeletal remains of the others show a great deal of broken bones and head trauma. The victims date back to the late seventies, all the way to when you were discovered. They solved many cold cases of missing girls when you were found.”

“And all that time he was never caught?”

“Not until it was too late.”

I inhale, quickly realizing these little cancer sticks will only be used when I’m stressed. “Let’s go.” I stomp the smoke out, crunching it under my boot.

Duke helps me up the rotted porch, leading me inside to see the destroyed space. There are needles on the ground, burnt aluminum foil. The walls are vandalized, and old beds have been dragged from somewhere and lay haphazardly on the floor.

Duke swears under his breath, leading me into the kitchen. I pause. There is still bloodstains on the floor, the outline of bodies. I shiver. “They didn’t come back to clean up the crime scene and since no one gave a fuck, everything stayed the same.”

I nod, my eyes latching on to the door that leads to the basement. My stomach churns and the need to throw up is so strong my eyes sting.

To think a door could hold so much power.

“Face your fears.”

I take a deep breath at the voice and walk, pushing the door open. Duke hands me a flashlight. “Do you want me to go with you?”

I shake my head. “No, just stay by the door but don’t shut it.”

As I take my first step down the stairs, I feel like I can’t breathe. My gut churns and I immediately want to go back. So what if I don’t remember? Maybe I don’t need to.

“It’s time, Starlette.”

I continue down until I see the two mattresses on opposite ends of the dank space, and the camera stand with no camera. And it’s right in front of Sienna’s mattress.

I gasp.

He had done a lot of things. Marred my body, left me bleeding, but he had never done... that. Never touched me in such an intimate way. I lay with my legs spread, blood seeping from between them as I stare at the dark ceiling above me. Listening to Sienna scream and cry as he does the same thing to her. Hot liquid drips over my cheeks, fast and uncontrollable.

“Shut the fuck up,” he growls.

But she doesn’t. She keeps screaming, the sound breaking everything inside of me. I flinch every time I hear the slap of flesh against flesh. But then her screams are cut off by gargling.

I sit up, my eyes flying over to where they are.

Sienna’s face is blue, her eyes budging from the sockets as he squeezes her around the neck. She claws at his hands, desperately trying to breathe.

“Sienna!” I scream, pulling at my bound hands. “Let her go!”

He doesn’t, and as if in a trance he ignores me. I continue screaming, watching as the life slowly fades from my twin sister’s face, her body going limp. He drops her, looking down at her body and shaking his head as if disappointed.

“You piece of shit.”

“Shut it, One,” he says, pulling up his pants. He doesn’t even look back as he goes up the stairs.

“Stop,” I whisper, my legs giving out from under me as I fall to my knees. My hands tremble as I wipe the tears from my face.

“You’re almost done.”

“Please, I can’t...”



I don't feel much of anything, but when it comes to Star, I feel *everything*.

Sadness.

Rage.

As if her own emotions are melting into mine. I can feel her pain, and I wish I could take it all away again. Wish I never made her relive it. But she has to heal. And to heal, she must feel. Though she's not even close to being done.

As her protector, my natural instinct is to erase any harm, but no matter how long I put her to sleep, this is one pain I cannot erase.

I hum her sister's favorite nursery rhyme, but I still feel her numbness fading through her body. This may be the one thing she can never come back from.

Problem is, she doesn't even remember the danger that is so near.

In order to save her, I'm going to have to break her.

Chapter 20



STARLETTE DOESN'T SAY ANYTHING.

She just stares out the window as I drive back toward her home where she requested I take her. I don't know what happened down in the basement. I have no clue what she saw or remembered, but she will barely look up. And I've never seen her look so numb. Like she's not seeing anything around her.

I pull up to her house and she blinks the trance away and places her hand on the door handle. Before she can get out, I gently touch her shoulder.

She sighs. "Just go, Duke."

"What? No—"

She cuts me off, “I mean it, leave. Leave me alone. Don’t contact me or search me out.”

“You just want to forget about us?”

“There is no us, Duke. You are my doctor. Nothing more, nothing less.”

My hand slips from her shoulder and she jerks the door open. It’s the strangest thing. My chest hurts, like it’s splitting open as I watch her walk to the front door of her childhood home and disappear inside of it.

As if she took a piece of me with her when she left.



I SIP MY COFFEE THE NEXT MONDAY MORNING, WAITING ON Elena to come to her appointment. She had a tough weekend with Starlette vanishing from her life like she was never there. She even questioned if Starlette was a figment of her imagination. And I wasn’t here to placate her, so her mind split and she lost it.

I’m supposed to show up and be professional. Act as if my entire life hasn’t been flipped upside down in less than seventy-two hours. I watched nurses pack Starlette’s room up earlier today. They may have dropped one of her fuzzy blankets. And I may or may not have grabbed it and hid it in my office so I could still smell her.

There is a knock on my door, and I call Elena in. She’s not her spunky self. No lavish mismatched clothes or even a brittle smile. She looks to be barely awake.

“Elena, please, take a seat.”

She slumps into the chair closest to the door. Not looking up as I ask her the typical, useless question. “How are you today?”

“I don’t want to talk,” she mumbles.

“Okay. We can just sit here.”

“Great.”

And so, we do.



WHEN MY DAY IS OVER AND I'M LEFT AWAKE IN MY apartment, I do something I shouldn't. I pull out my laptop, downloading the browser to locate the dark web. There is a lot of vocabulary I don't understand, but after clicking around and seeing things that will stain my mind until my dying day, I find my way around.

I was hoping the tapes would be gone. They're not. All it takes is payment in the form of a different currency and I can watch them. And I watch them all. Even though the quality is poor, I know exactly how every scar and forgotten bruise landed on her body.

And when I'm done, I puke.



In Loving Memory of Sienna Fawn.

Beloved Daughter and Sister.

I sit on the granite bench that rests on the opposite side of her tombstone. A light marble with gray swirled in. It's decorated for the season. Crisp apple reds and burnt oranges with brown accented flowers. Cute little pumpkins and a floral blanket that matches. I look at the death date, realizing that not only did she die that day, but so did I.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

Mom and Dad stand behind me, watching quietly as I let reality hit me.

“We tried,” Dad eventually says. “It's just... you didn't remember, and lately it seemed like you were getting better. We didn't want to jeopardize that.”

But I wasn't getting better. I was getting *worse*. All these years I spent being jealous, thinking she was out there living her best life. In reality, she was six feet under. And her last moment alive... she was being raped.

I rock forward, clutching my arms around my legs, a sob tearing up my throat. Why her? Why not me? She never deserved any of this. I do. I'm the fucked-up one. The one who

is literally crazy. She would have made something out of her life. A mom, a teacher, something. She would have been damn good at it too. And she could live without me.

I can't fucking do this.

I. Can't. Do. This.

"Yes, you can."

Shut up, I scream to the voice inside my head.

I just wish everything would stop.

Chapter 21



ONE MONTH Later

I blink, trying to decide if what I see in front of me is real or a play on my imagination. Starlette sits in the rec room across from a smiling Elena. I want to take in everything about her, but the fading bruise around her neck and the gauze on her wrist make me pause.

“Doctor Novak, could you come talk to the Fawns real quick?”

I look over to the board of director and then back at Starlette, swallowing hard. “Of course.”

An older version of Starlette and a man with her eyes wait for me at the check-in counter. I hold out my hand, trying to

pretend like I don't know the most intimate parts of their daughter.

"Doctor Novak," I say, giving them my best smile.

Her dad sticks his hand out, shaking mine. "Henry Fawn. Nice to meet you. We wanted to discuss Starlette."

"Would you like to do this privately?"

Henry looks to his wife who nods. "Let's take a step outside," Henry suggests.

Starlette's mother watches the two-way mirrors looking into the rec room. Longing and pain in her eyes.

I follow Henry outside, leaning against the old brick building. He stands beside me, his head falling to the wall as he lets out a long, exhausted sigh. "We were told you were the one in charge of her care?"

Amongst other things you would probably punch me in the face for.

"That's correct."

"I just... she was doing so good. Ready to come back to us after she did a little *soul-searching*. And somehow in the small amount of time, she remembers Sienna is gone and tries to commit suicide? It doesn't add up."

"How much has Starlette told you about her new diagnosis?"

He stares at me for a beat, brow furrowing. "What diagnosis?"

I tap my fingers against my slacks. "She is rather... extraordinary. She has multiple personalities. Dissociative identity disorder, or DID, as we call it for short."

"Excuse me? You're telling me my daughter has more than one personality?"

"Two, to be exact, which is what makes her extraordinary. It's rare to only have two, but not impossible."

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but where is your proof?"

“I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

Henry rubs his eyes. “I’m afraid I’m going to need more proof.”

“That is not something I can promise, but I’ll try.”



Since remembering my sister is gone, my world has stopped spinning. But everything around me is still moving. It is confusing because, how could the world even spin without her smile, without her very presence?

Noises sound like static, my brain running on autopilot until I can't take it anymore. I had a foolproof plan. Cut my wrist—the right way—and hang myself. It should have worked. And it would have, if my alter hadn't stuck a tiny knife in my back pocket and took over. Cutting me down and screaming for help.

I didn't want or need help. What I needed was to not deal with this fucking pain anymore. And if *she* wanted to live so damn badly, she should take over my body permanently and have at it. But she doesn't. Never taking this pain away from me. Because I need to feel to heal or some bullshit.

I haven't woken up in strange places since she showed herself to me. As if she's stepping back and allowing me to make my own decisions. Luck would have it that as soon as I want her to take over, she won't.

I stare at the blank canvas, refusing to participate in art therapy. All of this is pointless. Can't believe I somehow got myself put back in here. There are no pens in my prison cell this time.

“Starlette, you are needed in Doctor Novak’s office.”

And there is that. I’m not even going to think about all that.

I scrub my hands over my face harshly, a shaky sigh leaving me as I rise from my seat. Elena looks over from her stool next to me. “Are you okay?”

“Not even a little.”



It’s like everything in this place is stuck in time. Never changing. His office is still the same, the scent overwhelming and causing unwanted flashbacks of our time together. Even he hasn’t changed. A deep gray cashmere sweater clings to his chest and arms, slacks hiding his tree-trunk thighs, and those stupid fancy shoes. Just seeing him makes me feel an overwhelming need to cry.

His eyes flash to me, brows lowering in concern as my lip trembles. He walks to me, taking my shaking hands in his as his thumbs stroke across my skin lightly. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“She’s dead,” I croak, my legs giving way, but he catches me. Swooping me into his lap as we sit on the love seat. “And she... She died so horribly.”

His hand dives into my hair, lifting my head to look at him through blurry eyes as he searches them. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“He... he raped her and then strangled her to death. And I couldn’t do a fucking thing. Couldn’t save her. And the sick part? When she was lying there dead, all I could think was how peaceful she looked. How she didn’t have to suffer anymore.”

I couldn’t get her body out of my mind. Limp and growing cold as I watched.

“Death is easy. Living with it is hard.” He says it so lowly I almost miss it. He runs his fingertips over my bandages. “Want to talk about this?”

“No.”

“Well, I do. Don’t you ever try to fucking leave me again,” he grits out. “Damn it, Starlette, can’t you see how much I... How much I care about you?”

I swallow, looking at his fingers stroking my bandages. “I’m sorry.”

He pauses, a disbelieving look coming over his face. “What?”

I glare up at him. “I said, I’m sorry.”

“We should probably write this down.” He cracks a smile.

“Why am I here?”

“Ah, yes. I need to run some more tests. You won’t like it, though.”

“I don’t really like anything. Let’s get this over with.”

“But first...” he trails off.

Chapter 22



AS SOON AS the pout falls from her lips, I'm on her. Pinning her body to the couch, holding on to her bandaged wrist as if that alone would heal her ill-conceived thoughts.

I have fucking missed her. Her smart mouth, these fucking lips. I never knew I needed another person to breathe, but here I am. I love her, that much is clear, even if she doesn't feel the same. Unrequited love hurts, but I'm willing to wait her out. Besides, I have this sneaking suspicion that she loves me too.

"What are you doing?" she whispers, breaking our kiss.

"Isn't it obvious? Showing you how much I've missed you." She untangles her limbs from mine, pushing me off of her. She walks to the door without a word. That wouldn't do.

Pulling my tie off, I stalk after her, grabbing her hands and holding them behind her back as I push her chest into the door. “Why are you always running from me, butterfly?”

She gasps as the silk tie tightens around her wrist, restricting her movements. “If you didn’t want to get fucked, maybe you shouldn’t have worn this fuck-me dress,” I hiss into her ear, pushing the dress up to her waist, exposing her bare ass. I chuckle. “You definitely wanted to take my cock, baby, or you would have protected that pussy from me.”

She moans as I slap her ass, her head falling back onto my shoulder as I free myself. I waste no time, no foreplay, before I sink into her, groaning at her wet, desperate pussy squeezing around me.

“Fuck, Duke.” She cries out as I wrap my hand around her neck, the other digging into her hip as I thrust deeper inside her. She’s so loud, loving my cock, but I can’t let anyone hear her. Yanking my handkerchief out of my pocket, I shove it in her mouth. She stomps her tiny feet in protest but quickly grows slack as I thrust harder, faster, my head falling forward against hers as I get lost in her scent.

I never thought I would be into one woman again in my life, but the thought of another even looking in her direction makes me murderous.

There is a loud bang on my door and Starlette stiffens, but I keep my pace. “What?” I snap.

“Doctor Novak, we need your assistance in the rec room.”

I bite into her shoulder before I reply. “I’m busy, and I have a packed schedule today. You’ll have to find someone else.”

Starlette looks over her shoulder, tears in her eyes as she comes around me. I pull the handkerchief from her mouth before I capture her lips, biting the bottom one, then soothe her abused lip with my tongue and swallowing her tiny, almost silent moans.

“Okay, I’m sorry to bother you, Doctor Novak.”

I ignore the nurse, coming deep in her pussy. We both breathe heavily as I stroke her neck. “Did I tell you how much I’ve missed you, baby?” I whisper against her lips, kissing them gently as I untie her hands.

“No, maybe we should do that again so I can really believe it.”

I laugh. “Just admit you missed me too.”

She wraps her hands around my neck, her eyes slowly losing their spark. “But I didn’t.”

My beautiful little liar.



STARLETTE SITS IN THE LAB, THE ELECTRODE SET ATTACHED TO her head as she looks at the ceiling. I had her fill out an IQ test before coming over here to learn that my girl is frighteningly intelligent for someone who did her schooling here, after turning seventeen. I watch as the EEG measures her brain waves, printing them out for me. With guilt heavy on my chest and being unable to look at her, I bang on the table three times. I watch her eyes flicker as if she’s in a trance. Watch as her mannerisms change. How her eyes go from unamused to highly alert.

She raises a single eyebrow.

“I’m running some tests. I need you to stick around long enough to take an IQ test. Do you think you can do that?”

“Why are you running tests?” She tilts her head.

“For many reasons. My own personal use. Also, for Starlette’s parents.”

She nods, and I look over to the EEG. My eyes slightly widening as I watch the brain waves change completely.

If I thought she was faking it—which I didn’t—I have my proof now. Brain waves are unique for every person. If she were to be faking her other personality, they wouldn’t change.

I print them, gathering it all into a folder with the first set, before I walk over and take the headset off.

“Get your proof, Doctor?”

“Almost. I just need you to take this one last test.”

I lead her into the side room where a table sits with the test ready on the computer. Once she’s finished, I lean my hands on the table in front of her and say, “Give her back to me.”

Her eyes flicker and soon I’m graced with sparkling, angry eyes. “You motherfu—”

I capture Starlette’s lips. Just a small kiss. Lifting my head, I look down at the anger etched into her face. “Hi, beautiful. I missed you.”

Her eyes narrow up at me. “Stop doing that. Stop bringing her out without my permission.”

She’s right. I shouldn’t, but I know if given the chance, she’ll fight me. Instead of responding, I pull myself together. We may be alone but there are eyes watching us everywhere. I need to remember that. “You can go back to your scheduled therapy session now.”

She crosses her arms. “Are you dismissing me?”

“Yes.”

“Dick,” she murmurs, causing my lips to curl up at the side, but I hide it from her.

I grab my folder, locking the lab up behind me, and walk back to my office. Once I close the door, I pull up Starlette’s test scores along with her alter’s, printing them. As I compare them, it’s almost disbelieving how different the two IQ scores are. Both are intelligent but her alter is genius level. This, along with the brain wave scan, is all I need to prove my point. Not to mention the recording of her in the lab doing the EEG.

I pull out my notepad, jotting down a new prescription of medication. There are no medicinal treatments for DID, but I can limit what she takes to only antidepressants, anti-anxiety meds, and antipsychotics. Taking away all the unnecessary medications, like the ones she takes that are for ADHD. I log

on to my computer, putting the new prescription of medication through and adding some notes.

Studies show reports of some success with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, tricyclic antidepressants, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, beta blockers, clonidine, anticonvulsants, and benzodiazepines in reducing intrusion symptoms, hyperarousal, anxiety, and mood instability. She's on some of those things already but it's crucial we treat the illness with what she needs and take away the rest. I'm sure she would like to keep this a secret, as would I, but I took an oath. Which is laughable at this point. I've broken so many fucking laws, oaths, whatever. All I know is that I don't plan on stopping when it comes to her.

Not now, not ever.



STARLETTE STAYS QUIET FOR THE NEXT COUPLE OF DAYS. Adjusting to her new medicine, maybe. But more to do with the fact that she doesn't want to talk about her attempted suicide. But we will be talking about it. One way or another.

I take a sip of my coffee, resting it on my desk as a knock comes. "Come in." Starlette's parents enter my office. I stand, giving them my most reassuring smile, because what they're about to hear is going to be hard. And this will change the way they see their daughter. Even if they don't want it to, it will.

"Please, take a seat." I direct them over to the couch as I grab the file. They sit, her mother looking worried. Henry just looks tired. I take the seat in front of them, placing the file down and spreading it out on the table between us.

"What is it we are looking at here?" Henry asks.

"These are the brain waves tests, and these," I push out the other sheets, "are the IQ scores."

"They're different," Starlette's mother, Jennifer, notes.

"Yes, but they both came from Starlette. One is hers and the other is her alter's."

“There are two people in one brain? I thought that was just a scary movie plot?”

I shake my head, leaning back in my seat. “No, there are some well-known extreme cases like in the book, *Sybil*, the story of Shirley Mason and Billy Milligan. But Starlette’s case is very unique. Unlike most, she has only developed one alter. It’s extremely rare but not impossible. Very few cases of this have ever been reported.”

“So, how do we fix her?” Henry asks.

I grit my teeth. “There is no *fixing* her. There is no magic pill or cure. What I can do, however, is merge them.”

“Merge them?” he questions.

“Yes, where two becomes one.”

“And how do you do that?”

I sigh. “It’s a little too complicated to explain.”

“Well, then do it already.” I understand the anger that is fueled by the scary situation, but it still takes me a minute to check my temper.

I rise, pacing over to my desk. “I can’t just *do it*. She has to heal, has to remember.”

“So put her under hypnosis.”

“I can’t do that.” And I know by the tone of my voice, I have given myself away. The true nature of our relationship. Especially by the shocked look on her mother’s face.

“Why the hell not?”

“Because it’s an invasion of trust,” I tell them, exasperated.

Henry’s jaw tics, eyes narrowing. “I see. You have a thing for my daughter, don’t you, Doctor?”

And now her father has caught on as well. Great. Doesn’t change anything. I’ll set my license on fire if it means I get to keep her forever.

“Yes, sir. I do. But that only strengthens my need to help her. So, what I want you to do is sign her out of this fucked-up

facility and hand her over to me.”

Henry rises. “Have you lost your damned mind? We should report you.”

“You could. Honestly, you should, but I am the closest thing your daughter has right now. And I can help her.”

“I don’t—” her father starts, but Jennifer raises her hand, effectively cutting him off.

“If we do this, you help her and you bring her home. You got that? I’ve spent years away from my only living daughter and if there is a chance to have a relationship with her, to get to truly know her again, then that’s what I want.” Jennifer lowers her voice. “But if you hurt my daughter, do anything to damage the already fractured soul inside her, I’ll make the murder scene she was found in look like child’s play, understood?”

I smile. “Yes, ma’am.”

Chapter 23



IT'S LIKE A STARING CONTEST.

As if we are children. Neither one of us is willing to break the stare-off.

“I simply wanted to die.” I shrug.

“Why?”

“Because life sucks and I’m tired.”

“Butterfly...”

I sigh, leaning back in the big comfy chair in Duke’s home. Can’t believe my parents released me to him. It’s like they’ll do anything to not have to deal with me. “Can you just give it a rest?”

“No.”

Stubborn asshole.

I rise, wrapping my jacket around my waist as I walk to the back door, ignoring his calls. My bare feet slap on the wooden deck, the stars reflecting off the pool as I take a seat on the zero-gravity chair. Allowing it to tip me back a little.

My grandmother died when I was younger. It was sudden, tragic, and I couldn't quite wrap my mind around it. But Mom took me and Sienna outside one night, and she told us, “When you die, you become a star to shine bright over your loved ones.” So, that night we picked grandmother out a star. It had a tint of blue to it. And we knew we would always be able to find it.

As I look up at the stars, my lip trembling a little, I find a dainty pink star and I just know that's Sienna.

It's strange, I felt the loss of her all this time, but I thought it was just her absence in my life. I didn't think it was because she was really gone. And fuck, she had such a horrible death following our already horrible reality. She deserved better.

It should have been me. I should have died.

“I'm glad you didn't,” Duke says softly.

I turn my head, looking at his profile as he sits in the chair next to mine. I didn't even hear him come out. “What?”

“I'm glad you didn't die. I'm glad you're here.”

I guess I voiced my thoughts out loud. “She was the better one of the two of us.”

“You're good too, Starlette.”

“Am I, though?” I've never felt like the good twin. I was always getting in trouble when we were little. Always the one who started the fights that would leave her in tears.

“Everyone has good and bad in them. You just have to decide which one you will let outweigh the other.”

“I wanted to die because she was a big part of me. I'm not sure how to live without her. That's why I did it.” It feels good

to let that out. To let him know I wasn't trying to leave him, but that I could not deal with the thoughts in my head. To rewatch her death over and over again. Sienna and I were supposed to be a package deal. How is one of us supposed to live without the other.

“But you have been living without her. This whole time.”

“Yes, but that was because I thought I'd see her again. Now, it's just pointless.”

“Nothing about you is pointless, sweetheart.” He looks over to me. “You survived. You have a story to tell the world. You are the voice of all the girls who lost their lives to trauma. Not only that, you're also my future wife.” He winks.

I look up at him, unamused. “You don't want to marry me.”

“I prefer to keep you. A piece of paper makes no difference to me.”

I laugh. “Sometimes I think maybe *you* are the one with the mental issues here.”

He smirks. “Maybe. But it's not hard to see why I'm into you.”

“Because you like clinically insane women?”

He laughs, the baritone deep and rich, causing his eyes to crinkle at the edges. “That too.”

We both grow quiet, staring up at the stars. “I think I'm going to go to bed. It's been a long day of moving my life around.” I rise, stretching my arms.

“Promise me something, butterfly.”

“Yes?”

“Don't leave me.” There is a vulnerability in his voice. A side he rarely shows, and I know with his past how much it must have hurt that I tried to kill myself.

“Okay,” I whisper.



I WAKE TO THE SOUND OF MUSIC. IT'S HAUNTING AND beautiful. The expression pouring from every key of the piano that's touched. I slip out of the bed, making my way down the hallway and stairs. My bare feet are silent on the wooden floors as I inch closer to the living room. The only light pours from the moonlight through the windows. Highlighting Duke's bare muscular back as his head tips down.

I walk around him, climbing onto the sleek piano top, resting my head on my folded arms as I stare down at him. His eyes are closed, lost in the music. I soak in the vibrations of the notes under my body, watch his long, skilled fingers skate over the black and white keys. The sound brings goose bumps to my skin. So I close my eyes, getting lost in the melody with him.

The music ends and my eyes flicker open, connecting with mossy greens. So intense and on the verge of darkness as he watches me. His hands stretch out, capturing my waist as he pulls me to the edge. Gently parting my legs, exposing my bareness underneath the sleep shirt, his stubble scrapes against my inner thighs. His tongue following the path as his hands squeeze the outside of my thighs. Gripping the thick skin between his palms.

When his mouth parts me, my head falls back, my feet hitting the keys of the piano and creating an off-beat tune. But it's as if we don't hear them. He licks and sucks on my clit, fingers stretching me wide as he groans at my taste.

"So sweet," he murmurs into me, rubbing my sweet spot.

My toes curl as he pulls a moan from me. He works me to the edge, only to rip himself away from me. Just like he did that day in his office, but this time he's dragging me from the piano and bending me over the top of it. Flipping up my long sleep shirt, he slaps my thighs apart. A shocked whimper breaks from my lips. My nipples pebble, the chilly surface of the panino seeping through the material.

With one hand on my hip and the other on the back of my neck, he thrusts into me. Hitting deep and keeping me flat against the surface by my nape. “You feel that, butterfly?” he asks, flexing inside of me.

“Yes.”

“You feel me owning every inch of you? Erasing every touch of another?” He begins a slow pace of thrusting in and out of me. “Tell me, sweetheart. Does it heal you?” He kisses down my spine. “Do I take his last touch away from you? Replace all the bad memories with good ones?”

I gasp, my vision blurring, but not from sadness. From relief at his words, because yes, he does. He breaks me down and builds me up, sewing every inch of me back together. “Yes,” I croak.

He pulls me up, my back plastering to his front as he tips my chin to the side with one finger. He licks my tears away, kissing my mouth until we’re both coming.

And when it’s over, he picks me up and carries me to his bed.

And as I fall asleep, my body spent, I wonder if he knows I love him, even if I can’t say the words out loud.



“THEY ONLY FOUND TWO BODIES?” I ASK AS WE LAY IN Duke’s bed the next morning.

“Besides your sister’s and the ones buried in the yard, yes.”

I chew on my lip, “It seemed like there was a third person who lived there. Who came down to the basement and tortured us, but I can’t remember what they looked like or even sounded like.”

“Hmmm. No one else was ever found or mentioned. But the camera and tapes were also gone.”

“You’ve seen the tapes?” I rise up, pulling the sheet to cover myself as I look over to Duke.

His jaw tightens, eyes hard. “I have.”

“Can I see them?”

“Hell no.”

I nod. “That’s probably for the best. Were they at least taken down from the dark web?”

Duke pauses. “No. I don’t think anyone knows about that but me. That’s something you should have told the police.”

“Why?” I ask honestly. “They wouldn’t have believed me.”

They didn’t believe me then, and anyone who kept tabs on the case thinks I killed two people. Sure, I would have killed *him*, but not her. She was just as much a victim as we were.

“Sweetheart, why do you think there was a third person?”

“Just a gut feeling.”

“Are you ready to remember?”

I take a deep breath through my nose.

“Yes.”

Chapter 24



“I WANT you to buy this house and bulldoze it down,” I say to Duke as I stare at the dilapidated house that was once my prison.

“I can do that.”

“How can you do that, exactly? I’m sure someone of your profession makes money, but surely not that much?”

He chuckles lightly. “No. We don’t make that kind of money, but I’m a trust fund baby. Plus, my parents died when I was twenty. I sold off their pharmaceutical company. Didn’t have any use for it.”

“How old are you? I feel like I know you but actually know very little.”

“I’m thirty-three, butterfly.”

“Yikes, you’re old.” I make face at him.

He scoffs. “Thirty-three is not old, brat. It’s only eight years older than you. Besides,” he smirks, “I haven’t heard you complain once about my stamina.”

I smile at that, allowing myself to get lost in this carefree moment, but it slowly fades as I look back at the house. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Nothing has changed from the last time we were here. There are still needles on the floor, the dingy beds, and graffitied walls. Same bloodstains and outlines of dead bodies on the kitchen floor. I stare at them. Closing my eyes.

“Buckle up, Star. This one is gonna be bumpy.”

It can’t be worse than losing my sister.

The door bangs open, but I don’t look. I can’t stop staring at my sister. She looks at peace but dammit, I can’t live without her. I don’t want to. My heart snaps, and I wail, loud cries as fat drops of salty liquid spills down my face.

“Come on, One. We need to go,” Momma says as she undoes my tied-up hands, pulling my dress down to cover me. “We have to hurry.”

“I can’t leave her.”

“We have to. I couldn’t save her, but I can save you. Please, come!”

I turn to her, she stares at me with fear and urgency. I take her hand as we quietly make our way up the stairs. She pauses, putting a finger to her lips as she slowly eases the door open. She peeks out and then pulls me with her.

I have only seen the kitchen a few times. When he went out and she brought Sienna and me up here and baked us brownies and gave us a healthy meal. We step out into the kitchen and the house is quiet. Almost eerily so. “We have to hurry,” she whispers.

But before we can take another step, her body is pulled from mine. He stands there. A murderous look on his face as he stares down at Momma. "After all I've done for you, this is how you repay me."

She trembles in his grip. "You said I could keep them. You lied. You killed one of my babies."

"You delusional bitch, they're not yours. And I'll kill whoever the fuck I want in my own home." He tosses her to the ground, causing our hands to separate. "Now go to your room." He turns to look at me and I take a step back.

But she's not done, she grabs a kitchen knife with a cry and goes after him, but he's faster, twisting her hand until the knife falls, skidding across the floor and bumping into my feet. I bend down to reach for it. As I rise, I watch in horror as he cuts her stomach open.

It's like something snaps in me. I raise the knife, quickly stabbing it in the back of his head. He stumbles forward, falling beside Momma. For a man who seemed so big and scary, he bleeds just like the rest of us. And he went down so easily.

Momma gargles, blood seeping from her mouth as she watches me with glassed eyes. I bend down, putting her head in my lap and brushing her hair from her face. I slide the knife into the side of her skull, ending her suffering. She wasn't the villain in this story, not in mine anyway. We share the same villain, I just didn't allow him to warp my mind the way she had. I look down at her, watching for the second time today as someone's life drains from their eyes.

Gently, I lay her head on the floor and walk over to him. I tilt my head, dropping to my knees. I carve his eyes out, tossing them to the side. And then I remove his dick, stretching his mouth open wide and shoving it down his throat.

I grab the two knives and his eyeballs and walk into the living room, placing them into the fireplace. I strike a match and throw it, watching the wood burn. I strip off the dress I'm wearing and throw it into the fire as well.

I walk upstairs, finding a room with yellow wallpaper and old flower paintings. I walk in, going to what I assume is Momma's room. I wash the blood from my hands and arms in the en suite, then my face and neck. I pull an old, faded green dress from the closet that is way too loose on my frail body. Grabbing the bloodied washcloth, I go back down the stairs, throwing it into the fire and listening to the wet sizzle it makes.

I grab the pack of smokes on the table, pulling one out and going to the fireplace to light it. The less places my fingerprints are, the better. I light the smoke and sit on the carpeted floor in front of the fire and watch the flames engulf everything but the knives. But my fingerprints will be gone—and that's if they ever find the remnants of the knives.

Once the fire goes out, I clean out the ashes, putting them in a bucket I found in the kitchen. I carry it out to the back, walking into the woods until I find a stream of water. I dump the ashes in and then bury the knives in the earth, laying leaves over this small bit of dirt.

When I get back to the house, I'm exhausted. Too exhausted to track down the slimy bastard running down the driveway. I'd have to find him later. He isn't going to get away.

I grab a piece of mail by the front door, then proceed to use a blanket to grab the landline and call 911. I rattle the address off to the lady and end the call abruptly. And then I go and lay in the kitchen, knowing when I wake up, I'll remember none of it. Because it wasn't me doing it. I was watching it through my own eyes, as if viewing everything through a window. Not in control of my own body.

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

“What's wrong?” Duke asks, taking a step closer and reaching for me.

“Don't touch me.” I take a step back.

I'm the killer. “It was me.”

“What was you, butterfly?”

“I... I killed him.” I shake my head. “And there was a third person.”

And I know just where to find him.

Chapter 25



So, she did kill him—them, maybe?

Who fucking cares. They were monsters. She did everyone a favor. And I will take her secret to the grave.

“Don’t go quiet on me, butterfly,” I say as we drive back to my home.

“You should turn me in.”

“Like fuck I will.” My hands grip the steering wheel at the thought of her in an actual prison cell.

“By law, you have to.”

“Wrong,” I say. “By law, anything you tell me is confidential.”

She scoffs. “I’m sure this warrants committing a breach of confidentiality.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not turning you in. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She laughs, shaking her head as she looks out the window. “What is wrong with you? I’ve killed someone, I have another person inside my head, and you, what? Want to protect me? Why?”

She isn’t ready to know why, and I’m not sure how to say it without scaring her off.

“Because I care about you, butterfly.”

“I think you have some weird fixation with me. I’m not her. You can’t save her by saving me.”

“Trust me, sweetheart. I know that,” I grit. She is trying to push me away, but since I haven’t been scared away by now, I’m obviously here for the long haul.

The good and the bad.

Whichever personality she has.

No matter what the future brings, she’s mine.

The rest of the car ride is quiet. Filled with thick, suffocating tension. When we arrive back at my house, she storms out of the car. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel. Watching as she slams the front door.

But I focus on one thing she said...

There was a third person.



I FIND HER IN MY LITTLE HOME LIBRARY. SITTING IN THE middle of the room on the rug, a book sitting in her lap. I quietly close the door, but she hears the sound, her head snapping up. “Why do you have dirty romance books?” is the first question out of her mouth.

“I have all types of books.”

She purses her lips, looking back down at the book. “This one is dark and twisted. Blood kinks, really?”

I chuckle. “Ah, yes. That’s written by an old patient of mine. I haven’t read it, but the author is a little twisted on the inside.”

She smiles, looking back up. “She wrote ‘*Medicine can only do so much. –MT*’ on the first page.

I laugh. “Yeah, she’s... unique.” I hold my hand out when I reach her, pulling her up. The book drops to the floor, and I catch the name of the book. *We Dance in Sin*. I shake my head, looking back to my butterfly and cupping her cheek.

“When I touch you here, how does that make you feel?” I ask.

“Adored.”

“And here?” I say as my hand falls to her hip.

“Owned.”

I raise an eyebrow, my hand latching around her neck. “Here?”

“Protected,” she whispers.

This fucking woman.

I jerk her to me, my lips descending and running over hers. Her hands reach for my pants, unbuckling my belt and pushing them down. It’s a frenzy of getting our clothes off as she touches me. Running her hands over my abs, counting them as she does. She works her way around my waist, nails scraping into my back.

I take us to the carpet, my hands trapping hers by her head as I thrust inside her, no warning. I watch as her mouth parts with each stroke, eyes fighting to stay open and watch me as she slips deeper into pleasure. I pound into her with uncontrolled thrusts. Any other time I’ve done this, I’m always in my right mind, I’m in control, but when it comes to her, I lose all my senses and the need to consume her overtakes me.

Leaning back on my haunches, I push my shirt that she insists on wearing—nothing underneath—up her body, tying her hands with it so she can't move them. I was a little skeptical of binding her arms, considering all her past trauma, but then I thought... why not replace this little act with pleasure instead of pain?

I pull her legs around my waist so I can hit that soft spot inside her that drives her wild. Using my thumb, I rub circles over her clit, watching her tight little body tremble. Hearing her moans go from controlled to unruly. Small gasps, purring like a kitten, as I thrust into her.

My eyes lower as I watch her lose her mind with her impending orgasm. I slide my other hand to her parted lips, loving the silkiness of them against my fingertips. I slip my thumb inside her mouth, growling as she sucks it like it's my cock. She bites down on it as she comes. Her body jerks and twitches as she moves over my cock feverishly, chasing her release. And fuck, just watching her makes my balls tighten. Slipping out of her heat, I have barely stroked once before I'm spilling all over her breasts.

Setting her down on the rug, I run my cum-covered dick over her lips, coating it. I lean down, licking my seed off her lips, then push my tongue in her mouth so she can taste us. The euphoric taste of how fucking perfect we are together. All the while I massage my semen into her heavy breasts, making sure everyone can smell me on her, so she can feel me when I'm absent.

Groaning, I shift down her body. I know she's tired but I'm so goddamn addicted to her, I can't stop myself from making her come just one more time before I take her upstairs and fuck her in my shower.

After I make her come three more times—what can I say? I'm deeply sick in the head when it comes to her—Starlette rises to her knees and I rub my aching dick over her lips. “Be a good fucking girl and open your mouth, sweetheart.”

And she does, because she's just as addicted to me.

When we finish, I stare down at her.

I've seen all the looks. The post-sex crazed eyes with infatuation, wild hair, a smirk on her lips.

The 'let's go again' look as if she'll attack me at any minute. But this look, this almost innocent look. Trusting eyes, hair a mess and hiding a part of her face. The light pink hue to her cheeks, her lips puffy, pouty. The innocence she paints as she stares up at me. This look makes you want to tuck her into your body, plant kisses on her neck and nose, run your fingers through her hair as she rests on your chest. Makes you want to consume and protect her. I've never seen this look on anyone before, but it has to be the most compelling.

Chapter 26



It's weird to be on the other side of the spectrum. To be the one to visit and not be visited. I wait patiently, as all the other families do. They all look so happy, but they have no clue what really goes on in a place like this. Until they live it, they can't possibly know. It's not entirely their fault, I guess.

The room grows louder with excitement, and my own mouth twitches as I see Elena skipping to me. All smiles and wide eyes. "Star!"

"Elena." I smile back at her from my seat.

She sits down, folding her hands under her chin. "This place is an epic failure without you here. The new doctor is nice, I guess, but she always has salad in her teeth."

Duke left the facility to be my in-house doctor after he somehow convinced my parents to allow me to live with him, never returning to Mountain View. Choosing to do that online doctor thing instead, where the patient fills out a questionnaire and then chats with the doctor afterward via video call. Yeah, it's whack and probably shouldn't be legal.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. "Have you tried telling her?"

She blows a raspberry. "No, where is the fun in that?"

"How are you doing?" I say, changing the subject.

She shrugs. "The medicine is working, but I don't have anyone to talk to anymore. No one wants to play my card games." She pokes out her bottom lip as if pouting.

"What fucking lame-os. Just focus on getting better so you can get out of here and we can do stuff together."

She looks away. "I don't have anywhere to go when I get out of here."

I grab her hand, urging her to look at me. "You always have a place with me."

She sniffs. "You don't mean that."

I glare. "Of course I do. You're my best friend, Elena."

She gives me a wobbly smile. "You're my best friend, too."

I smile back. Holding her hand for a moment longer. "How's everything else, besides the new doctor?"

"Nurse Mick has been on edge ever since you left. Sending us to the psych ward more often than usual. For nothing!"

I purse my lips. "I'll see what I can do about him."



AFTER I LEAVE ELENA, I WALK TO DUKE'S CAR, THIS ONE A Mercedes, listening to him lecture me about my shoes with my

phone to my ear.

“Tell me how someone who is so anal about how things sit on shelves and desks is the same person who leaves shoes in front of doors for me to trip over?”

“Calm down, I’ll pick them up so you don’t break a hip, old man.” I silently laugh to myself.

“Watch your mouth, I’m in no mood for your smart mouth today. I’ll punish it when you get home.”

“Are you bluffing or threatening me with a good time?” I click the unlock button on the key fob and open the driver’s side door.

He chuckles darkly. “I can make your throat raw, your voice hoarse, from screaming for mercy. Don’t play with me, Starlette.”

I go to climb in, when something hits me in the back of the head, causing my body to fall into the side of the car and slide down the door.

As my eyes fight to stay open, Duke yelling through the abandoned phone on the ground, I see shoes walking toward me before it all goes black.

Chapter 27



“I CAN’T BELIEVE I finally have you again.” He grins as he turns down the old road that leads to the house I was once kept a prisoner in.

I didn’t see it before—or maybe *she* didn’t allow me to, but now it’s so obvious. Why he wanted to watch the ones being held in solitary confinement. Why he knew my tics and made me feel so uneasy. Why I want to kill him. Because Nurse Mick is not in fact a nurse, nor is his name Mick. They called him Brother. And he was the one who stood behind the camera.

“Do you remember me, doll?”

I stay quiet, my eyes narrowed on him as he puts the car into park.

He laughs. “You had so much to say at the facility. Now, now, One. Don’t go quiet on me.”

Visions of ripping apart his neck with my teeth flash before my eyes. I don’t know if it’s my memory or hers, but I see the scar now as I look closer at his neck. A tiny smirk lifting my lips. He smacks the steering wheel three times, and my smirk turns into a full-blown smile. She won’t be coming to play with him. Because I’m healing, and that’s all the fuck I’ve done lately.

“Stupid bitch.” He reaches out, grabbing me by my hair. Dragging me over the console and out the driver’s side door. “Let’s finish this.”

I stumble on my feet, trying to keep up with his wide steps as he rounds the side of the house, hitting a switch on the electrical box. I see out of the corner of my eye as the lights inside come to life.

Did he seriously keep the electric bill paid all this time? Or maybe he’s been living here all along? Though that’s doubtful. This place looks abandoned.

He goes on the move again, dragging me by a fistful of my hair. And I realize... the whole time I was what made him angry.

He drags me up the old stairs, over the needle-littered floor of the living room. I’m numb to all of it. The scene before me. What may happen next. But I start to feel the chills of fear skate down my spine when he goes for the basement door. I dig my shoes into the peeling floor, but to no avail. He drags me down the stairs, my knees scraping against them as we go.

“Which mattress do you prefer, One? Yours, or maybe your sister’s? It would be poetic for you to die in the same place she did, would it not? Oh, decisions, decisions.”

With my head bent in his grip, I swing my fist, connecting with his stomach, causing him to grunt. He tosses me aside, my head smacking into the concrete wall as I fall onto the place I last saw my sister.

I hear the sound of *Father's* voice and the screams of Sienna. I tilt my head, eyes connecting with the camera as one of the tapes plays. I shake the sensation of hearing her screams for help and look up to Mick.

My breath leaves me when he straddles me, but I don't relent. I won't go down without a fight. Idiot knew better than to not tie me up. I kick my legs, trying to buck him off, but he's so much heavier than me. He restrains my hands with the old, worn leather straps they used on my sister.

So many emotions flood through me. Anger, hurt, and most importantly, guilt. No, I couldn't change my sister's fate. I couldn't take her pain and brand my skin with it. There was nothing I could have done, but it still feels like poetic justice that my life ends here. Right in the very place she took her last breath after I listened to her screams and pleas.

"Smile for the camera, One."

I look up to the blinking red dot of another camera. This one newer than the one playing the tape.

"I can take over..."

I have never heard her voice so quiet yet violent.

No. I need to do this. Sienna never got to escape. It's only fair I don't either. I think of Elena. How I hope she finds peace and lives a beautiful life. My parents, how I hope they heal even though I know they won't. And I think of him. My savior. My doctor. My Duke. I hope he heals too. Finds someone worthy of him. Someone the opposite of me.

"You can taste it, am I right?"

"Taste what?" I humor him.

"Death."

He isn't wrong—for the first time in his pathetic excuse of a life.

I smile. "Yes, but can you see it? The metal bars of your prison cell as your roommate molests you every night? Can you taste the food one wouldn't feed their dogs? The bittersweet feeling of relief, dying behind the very thing you

kept so many countless, innocent girls behind? Tell me, how do you feel about spending the rest of your miserable life in prison?”

“Shut the fuck up, One.” He flicks something at me, and a drop hits my skin, dissolving in it. *Acid*. It burns and makes me eyes water, but I never look away from him. Not even flinching. “Come on, One,” he grits. “You know how this works. You scream and cry for the camera and then I’ll put you out of your misery.”

I spit at him instead. Which is why when I smell gasoline, I’m not surprised. The faster we get this over with, the better. He drenches me in the gas, striking a match, and I watch his eyes dance behind the tiny flame as he smiles. He better run fast, because as soon as my skin catches fire, I’m taking him with me. Straight to fucking hell.

A wooden bat smacks him in the head, and he drops dead. My eyes widen as I look up at Duke. He looks murderous as he stares at me. “You came,” I almost whisper, “but how...”

“He didn’t take your cellphone. I tracked it,” he explains, bending down and undoing the leather bounds.

To be fair, I always forget I have one. If Duke had not reminded me to put it in my purse, I would have left it at his home.

Once my wrists are free, I rise with Duke’s help. My hand wraps around the bat in his hand, slowly releasing it from his grip. “Go,” I whisper, my lips skating over his.

This is my fight.

“No.” He grips my hips, bringing my body flush against him. “I’m not leaving you again.”

“You’ll be an accessory to murder.”

“I’ll be whatever you need me to be,” he promises with a kiss.

“I cannot allow my darkness to stain your soul.”

“Drop it, butterfly. I’m staying.”

A defeated sigh escapes me. And when I turn to Mick, I cannot find it inside of me to kill him. Because I'm not a killer. *She* is.

But as I picture the pain he inflicted on my sister, the pain he must have caused so many innocent girls, something switches inside me.

I don't want to be a killer. I've spent most of my life trying to convince people that I'm not... But he deserves it. If anyone is going to take him out, it's going to be me.

I take a step toward Mick, baseball bat clutched in my hand. But Duke has me pausing. "We can call the cops?"

I let out a sigh of relief as the bat falls limp to my side. He's giving me an out. "Okay. You call them."

And then I bring the bat down on Mick's face. Hoping it crushes his fucking skull.



DÉJÀ VU. THE FLASHING BLUE AND RED LIGHTS. THE POLICE officers telling me I'll have to come to the station with them.

I turn to Duke but before I can speak, he says, "I'll meet you there."

Mick didn't die. Such a pity.

"Should have let me take over."

I smile at the voice in my head. It's nice to never be alone.

The ride into town is long, and once we arrive, I'm thrust into a cold room with a two-way mirror. I think the police have been trying to catch me for a long time. But today won't be that day, boys.

I remember the caterpillar mustache. The honey eyes. The officer who questioned me last time. "Starlette Fawn. I had a feeling I would see you again." He sits, sighing. The lawyer my parents apparently hired sits beside me and as I look over to him, he nods.

“I’m ready to talk.”

The detective’s eyebrows shoot up. “Really? After all this time, why now?”

“Because now I remember.”

He folds his arms over his chest, leaning back in the metal chair. “I’m all ears.”

So, I start from the beginning. Only lying toward the end.

“He killed them?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t he kill you?”

I blink at the detective. “How am I supposed to know? Ask him.”

“Why were you asleep on the floor?”

“Passed out from the scene in front of me.” I shrug. It’s a solid excuse.

He sighs. “We’ve secured the video footage of him taking you. It seems like self-defense to me.” He stands, holding out a hand, and I take it, shaking it. “Starlette Fawn,” he repeats with a quiet laugh, “don’t let me catch you in here again.”

I smile. “Yes, sir.” Before I leave, I pause. “Did you get the camera?” He nods. “Promise me you’ll figure out a way to bring them all down. There are millions of innocent young girls on the dark web. And behind it all, child abusers that deserve the harshest penalty the law has to offer.”

“You have my word, Miss Fawn.”

Chapter 28



So, my girl grew her wings and learned to fly without me.

I beam as I look out the windows of her eyes. Duke smiling down at her. I can feel her warmth and happiness radiating from inside. How her heart beats fast as he leans down and kisses her.

I think it's time I go. Let her live on her own. But that is hard. We've been through so much together. And now I have to trust some man to protect her. To put her before himself and always do what's right for her.

To love every dark shade of her.

He does love her. And she loves him. They just haven't said it yet, but I can see what they can't.

“What’s wrong?” Duke asks her. His brow furrows in concern.

“I’m not sure. I feel... sad?”

I pull in my emotions. I want her to feel the lightness of this moment, not the bittersweet goodbye from me.

I thought my job was forever, but I’m happy it’s over. Because that means she’s going to be okay.

Chapter 29



TWO MONTHS Later

“I’m scared,” I say, clutching Duke’s hand as we sit in my favorite spot on the roof, looking up at the stars.

“Don’t be scared. Just close your eyes. Go to your inner world where the two of you exist.”

We’ve been trying this for a month now, after allowing me to adjust and deal with my trauma the first month. But every time, something holds me back.

But this time, I know it’ll be the last time I see her.

I close my eyes and search for her. Her long red hair drags across the ground as she stares back at me. This time, the

scene a field of bright flowers and rolling green hills. “I’ve been waiting for you, Starlette.”

She holds out a hand and I take it.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” I say. “What if I need you?”

She blinks. “I’m always with you. We will become one instead of two.”

Emotion clogs my throat, and my eyes feel heavy. It feels as if I’m losing a piece of myself.

“It’s time, Starlette,” she says, bringing me in for a hug. I close my eyes as I feel her slip into me. Feel us fuse into one. And when I open my eyes, all I see is a faint red star in the sky.



They're subtle. The hints of Protector that are now her. But she no longer responds to things said or done in threes. Except, she does glare at me. I mean, I had to try. I've never done a merge, and the scale of success for one is lower than most may expect. She's still Starlette, but she's Protector too. Like the hardness she looks at the world with. I have no doubt if they had merged before the Mick ordeal, she would have killed him. And I would have hidden the body.

Starlette is complex. She spent so long hidden under an armor, no one truly saw how soft she could be. No one but me.

I watch her as she plants flowers in my flower bed. Apparently, I'm an old, boring man who needs some color in his life. I'm only eight years older than her but she won't stop calling me old and asking if I've remembered to take my heart medication. The smart-ass.

She wipes the sweat off her forehead, leaving a streak of dirt behind. She's chosen blood-red flowers, who knows what the fuck kind they are. I'm not sure she does either. Just took my credit card and made it happen. She likes to spend money and I like having an abundance of it for her to enjoy it.

So far, those are her hobbies. Shopping and gardening. But after introducing her to TikTok, she thinks a simple farm life is our life goal. Wants us to make our own bread and butter. Buy

some little animals to roam the land and live our life isolated from the rest of the human population.

It's not a horrible idea, but I think she should live a little before she decides to isolate herself. We're working on it. A little at a time.

I've returned back to work, and as promised I took her back to her family. Well, only while I'm at work. She spends the day with her mom and dad; they retired last year so they have all the time in the world for her. Rebuilding their relationship one step at a time.

I can tell it makes her happy. And maybe a little sad. Because some days she comes home and crawls into my lap. Just sitting there, listening to my heartbeat.

"Sweetheart," I call. She looks over to me, pushing her big, floppy hat out of the way. "Come inside for a little bit.

She huffs, putting the flowers down and dusting the dirt from her jean shorts. I hold the door open for her, allowing her to walk in before me. She heads for the kitchen, swaying her ass as she does. She pauses, turning her head over her shoulder and sending me a flirtatious wink.

I chuckle, stalking after her. I plant my hands on the island and watch as she gets a drink, sitting the glass down slowly, her eyes never leaving mine. "If I catch you, I'm stuffing that pouty little mouth with my cock."

Her eyes lower, cheeks heating. "And if I escape?"

I walk around the island, and she counteracts my movements. "If you escape, which is unlikely, I'll feast on your tiny little cunt instead."

She blinks and then takes off. Her floppy hat abandoned as she dashes out the back door. I grin, tapping the counter to give her a head start. Running is not her strong suit by any means. After a total of twenty taps, I stretch my neck, then proceed to walk to the back door after her. I see her running in the direction of the old shed where she keeps her gardening things. I sprint after her, catching her by her thick strands and pulling her against me. "Drop to your knees, Miss Fawn."

Chapter 30



ONE YEAR Later

I remember fall as a child. The smell of pumpkin spice and old leaves crunching under my tiny shoes. How the breeze was a perfect crisp, and everything was a little darker. I loved it then as much as I love it now. The pumpkins decorating every storefront. Plus, I get to wear these huge, comfy sweaters.

Since being on the outside—that's what I'm calling it—I've learned some things about myself. I love makeup, for one. Now that I understand how to use it, thanks to my mom, I wear it every now and then. Clothes are fun. I may only have one personality now, but clothes give me the option to express myself. Another thing is coffee. Coffee is life when you can add thousands of calories to it. And *Jerry Springer*. I do love me some Jerry. Apparently, my generation grew up watching

him on daytime television when they were home sick. I didn't get to experience that, so I found a streaming service with it on, and I watch at least two episodes a day. Seems silly, but I love it.

And I'm still holding on to the idea of self-isolation on a little farm, but I know rationally I can have a little farm without isolating myself in the process. I'm currently attempting to convince Duke that mini cows and fainting goats are the perfect animals for our farm. He says there is no money in that. Which I counter with, '*No, but there is happiness.*' We're still ironing out the details.

Life with Duke the past year has been unimaginable in the most amazing way possible. I did have a bit of a meltdown after I first merged with my alter. It felt like I lost a piece of myself for a while, as everything I had endured up to that moment seemed to all crash down on me. I had to see a new therapist—for obvious reasons. And after working on myself as well as talking about my past, I began to heal more. But it was hard. I wanted to give up so many times. But I couldn't. I didn't fight my way out of hell to just quit. Once I got a taste of my new life, there was no way I wasn't going to fight like hell for it.

Once I accepted it wasn't my fault what happened to Sienna and me, it was easier to process the rest. It's hard not to cast blame on myself when I bestowed the role of my sister's protector on myself. Which is why my brain fractured into two. I was so focused on saving her, I forgot to save myself, which is how Protector was born. She was solely made to take care of me.

I do miss her, as crazy as that sounds. I've always had someone with me since I was conceived, whether it be Sienna or Protector. It's scary to hear silence. But I realize I'm not alone. I have Duke and my parents. And I have Elena.

A huge smile breaks across my face as I see Elena waving at me from outside of the coffee shop we decided to meet at.

Duke found a new medicine. You only take it twice a year. Of course, insurance doesn't cover it, but Elena doesn't know

that. Duke covers it with his mountain of money. It seems to be working really well. She's got her own place now, and a job she's been working at for the last six months. She's doing great, and I'm so tremendously proud of her. I know how hard it is to recover and live with a mental illness. Ours are much different but the same.

"Star." She smiles, reaching for me and embracing me in a hug.

Elena's fashion sense is a little off still. Like the yellow rubber boots and green bodysuit she's sporting. Her hair is longer, just hitting below her shoulders. Thick and straight. And her eyes, they sparkle.

"Elena." I squeeze her. "How are you?" I ask as the door chimes above us.

This coffee shop has that warm, homey feeling. The thick, fluffy couches and lamps on end tables. A fireplace roaring. It feels like a cottage, only one full of tables with patrons busy on their laptops.

"You remember that girl I was telling you about?"

I smile, placing our orders before Elena and I find purchase on the couch in front of the fireplace. "Yes. Maggie, was it?"

She nods eagerly. "Yes, Maggie. Well, she asked me out, and I said yes." I've seen Elena smile before, but this one is different. There is no sadness hidden in its depths.

"Oh. You've been holding out on me," I tease.

She scoffs. "Whatever. So, when are you and the good doctor getting married?"

I thank the lady who hands us our coffees and frown at Elena. "Never."

She laughs. "He asked and you said no. Again."

"I've only known him for two years—we've only been together for one year and he was my doctor for almost a year before that. Why would I jump into marriage?"

“Because you’re basically already married, Star.” She rolls her eyes, sipping her coffee.

“Yeah, well. I’m not ready yet.”

Elena waves me off, pulling out her phone. “Let me show you Maggie. If she asked me to marry her, I wouldn’t say no.”

I laugh, leaning in close as Elena scrolls through a million pictures of the redheaded, freckle-faced bombshell that is her girlfriend. And we spend the rest of the morning laughing and just being at peace in each other’s company.



MY PARENTS MOVED TO A BROWNSTONE IN THE UPSCALE PART of the city. It’s vastly different to my home as a child. Bedrooms on the third floor, kitchen and living room on the second, and laundry and spare rooms on the bottom. I don’t love the layout of the homes in this area. It feels tight, too tall, if that makes sense.

I sit my purse on the rack at the bottom, kicking my shoes off because my mother is anal about dirt on her floors, even though it’s inevitable. I pull my scarf off, hanging it on the rack as well before treading up the stairs. I’m out of breath before I reach the second floor.

My dad sits in his La-Z-Boy, frowning at ESPN as they talk football stats, with a Coke in his hand. I notice he has no vices—that I know of. I’m not sure how he deals with all the turmoil, but he does.

“Hey, Dad.”

His head swings over to mine, a big smile on his face. “Hey, Star Bear. How are you?”

I shrug. “Good. Exhausted from the stairs.”

He chuckles. “You should take me up on that offer of working out.”

“Gross, Dad.” I scrunch up my nose in mock disgust.

Mom comes down from the third floor, wrapping a scarf around her neck, her eyes lightening up as she sees me. She brings me in for a tight hug, smelling my hair in that weird motherly way. She pulls back. “Ready to go?”

I nod.

Mom, Dad, and I climb into their car, driving to the cemetery. It’s something we do the first Sunday of every month. When we get out, I gather the old decorations and flowers from Sienna’s grave, taking away the bright summer colors. We replace the abundance of summery flowers with ones of orange, red, and brown. White and gold pumpkins to accent it and break up all the flowers, giving it a fall vibe. Handmade little bows to tie it all together.

I replace her flowers in the pots with white roses that are tipped in gold. Sticking some on those pumpkins and tying matching ribbons around the pots. Most of this will stay up until after Thanksgiving. I plan on adding new things for Halloween and changing them out in time for Thanksgiving.

Taking a step back, I wipe a tear from my eyes as my mom and dad slide in beside me.

“She would be so proud of you,” Mom whispers.

“We’re proud of you,” Dad says.

“Thanks, guys.”



“HONEY, I’M HOME!” I CALL OUT AS I STEP INTO OUR HOME. I frown as I kick my shoes off. He hates that, by the way, me not putting my shoes in the cubby. But I enjoy riling him up. It’s good for his old-man brain.

The house is quiet, making the small hairs on my arms stick up on end. I pull the knife from my purse, clutching it in my hand as I strain my ears to see if I can hear anything suspicious. I make my way up the stairs and catch movement at the top. I crouch down and when I reach the top, I jump out, holding my knife to the attacker’s neck.

Duke glares down at me, grabbing my hand with the knife and jerking it away. “What the hell, butterfly?”

I let out a breath and loosen my hold on the knife. “Why the hell didn’t you say anything when I called out?”

He grips my cheeks and pulls me in for a smothering kiss. “I was on the phone in my office, I didn’t hear you.” He smirks. “What were you going to do with that knife, anyways?”

I purse my lips. “Stab you in your coronary artery, of course.”

He laughs. “Come on, we have somewhere to be.”

I stick my knife back in my purse. “Where?”

“It’s a surprise, you’ll see.”



A CIGARETTE HANGS FROM MY LIPS AS I LOOK AT THE OLD worn-down building that was once my prison. The wood barely hanging on to keep it upright. I haven’t been back here since that night Mick took me. I don’t regret much, but I should have hit him a few more times. I have it on good authority he gets the punishment he deserves every single day. And it wasn’t even my doing. Duke is the one paying for his constant beatings—his idea. I told him karma would get old Mick, which he responded with, *‘Fuck karma, I’m much scarier.’*

So, yeah. Not sure how he keeps his license as a doctor. He’s highly unhinged when it comes to me. And I love that. Love that his inner beast wants to protect mine. It’s kind of cute. Because out of the two of us, I’m the dangerous one. Always will be.

My hand clutches his as the wrecking ball hits the house, taking it down with two hits. It’s funny how something that once was so powerful in my mind is actually so weak. Crumpling at the weight of another force.

“Duke.”

“Yes, butterfly?”

I swallow. “I love you.”

He yanks me closer, wrapping his arms around my shoulders. “I love you too, Starlette. Forever.”

Epilouge



Five Years Later

You may ask her to marry you a thousand times, and she'll say no each and every time. But that one time she says yes, she'll demand a quick Vegas wedding.

I clutch Starlette's hand tightly as we wait our turn to go before the king of rock 'n' roll. Shit you not. I haven't let her hand go, just in case she tries to book it.

She chews on her lip, looking around nervously. "What is it, butterfly?"

She looks up to me. "Do you want kids?" she blurts out.

I have to hold in my laugh at her startled question as she tries to stare into my soul. "I mean... maybe? Why?"

She huffs. “Why are we even getting married if we don’t know if we want kids?”

“Well, do you?”

She pauses. “No... well... maybe. I’m not sure.”

“Great.” I pull her in closer. “We’ll figure it out another time.”

“Starlette Fawn and Duke Novak,” the lady calls.

I smirk at my soon-to-be wife. “Can’t wait to have you for dessert, Mrs. Novak.”



Starlette frowns at the slot machine, all the money gone as if it never existed. “I don’t like gambling,” she declares as she stands, shooting the slot machine another glare before she turns to me. “I’m not sure how people get addicted to this shit. I could have bought so many things with the money I just lost.”

I shrug. “Sometimes people win, and winning is a high.”

I grip her hand, smiling at the diamond on her ring finger. I bring it to my lips, placing a kiss on her hand. “I can’t believe we are finally married. It only took you six years to say yes.”

She nods. “I wanted to make sure you were the right one for me.”

I give her a pointed look. “I was willing to bury a body for you, and you still weren’t sure?”

She grins. “No, I knew you were it for me, but I got great amusement watching you try to find new ways to propose.” She looks up at me. “I love you more than I love myself, Duke, and I *would* hide a body for you. I would burn the world down in search of you if you went missing.”

“Hey.” I stop us. “I’m the one who is supposed to confess my love for you, not that other way around.”

She cups my cheek in her small hand. “You’ve done that countless times. Besides, this isn’t a movie, I can confess my love. This is the era of feminism.” She winks. “And... thank you.”

My brow furrows. “For what, baby?”

“For loving me. Healing me. For seeing what everyone else couldn’t.”

I smile. “I’d do it over and over again, as long as I end up right here in this moment with you.”

She rolls her eyes, smiling. “Sappy, old man.”

I chuckle, pulling her into my side. “Now, about these kids...”

She sighs. “What if I pass my craziness on to them?”

“Sweetheart, DID isn’t hereditary. It’s environmental.”

She frowns. “So, they could be normal?”

I click my tongue. “With you as a mom? No. But weird moms build great characters.”

She pushes my shoulder. “Do you want kids?”

“Someday, maybe. But right now, I just want to spend all my time with my wife. Inside her, preferably.”

She tosses her head back, a laugh breaking free. “Well, let’s go then.”



Two Years Later

I succeed in everything I do. Including knocking my wife up. Twins on the first try. All jokes aside, I was nervous that her having twins would be triggering, but it hasn’t. Two mean little identical boys who raise hell at the tender age of one and three months. We definitely have our hands full. Not only that, but they are momma’s boys through and through. They

actually tried to beat me up when I held her hand the other day. The stingy little things.

After labor, Starlette told me to soak it up because she was never doing that shit again. And she meant it. And I'll willingly admit that my heart is full with my little family. This is all I need to live a happy life. My wife and my boys. Not to mention the stupid fainting goats and mini cows. I caved during her pregnancy when I found her crying outside. She said the land was so lonely with no animals to run on it. It was comical until she looked up at me with big, sad eyes, tears staining her cheeks. So, I went out and bought the stupid animals that day. I couldn't fucking stand the tears and sadness.

That's where they are now. Running through the field, said fainting goats currently playing parkour off the old playground they just had to have. The twins hold each of their mom's hands as she walks them to the mini cow barn.

I lean my arms on the fence, a smile taking over as I watch them giggle as the cows eat out of their hands. And when my beautiful wife notices me, she smiles, flashing one of her middle fingers at me.

I bark out a laugh.

At one time, I had no real purpose in life—just save as many people as I could and move on to the next. I never dreamed it'd be me who needed to be saved. That I was the one who was barely living. She thinks I saved her, but she is the one who saved me. And for that, I've dedicated the rest of my life to taking care of her in any way I can. She's my air, my soul, my reason for breathing.

My butterfly is my everything, and I can't wait to see what new colors her wings will be.

Epilogue



Five Years Later

No one tells you when you become a mother that there will be times when you feel like fighting other kids' parents. I don't care what you say, bullying starts at home and when your home life starts to affect my babies, I will go to war.

As long as my stable husband isn't around.

But today he is. Such a pity.

Lucas and Silas sit in the chairs next to us as we wait for the principal. Lucas, my soft baby who reminds me so much of my sister, is wiping tears from his cheeks. Silas, however, has his arms crossed, eyes glaring at the little boy that has been giving his brother trouble for months. I've called the school, I've met with the teacher and principal. Nothing was done. I'm

not sure why the school can't get ahold of this bullying thing, but they better figure it out stat before this Karen who is currently giving Silas the evil eye gets a beatdown.

"Better watch where you aim those eyes," I snap.

Duke rests a hand on my shoulder to calm me, but when it comes to my boys, I feel like an animal. I must protect them at all costs. Karen averts her eyes to the floor.

The principal walks in, looking all kinds of exhausted at seeing me. *Good.*

"Mr. and Mrs. Novak, pleasure to see you. Hate that it's on these terms, of course." He sighs, sitting in his chair behind his desk. "It seems Silas beat Andrew up today. We have a strict no-fighting policy."

I already don't like where this is going, so I stand. "Yeah, well, your no-bullying policy should be just as strict." I hold my hand out, ready to get out of here. "Come on, boys."

The principal rises. "Now, hold on."

I blink at him. "No. because it sounds as if my son is about to be expelled for protecting his brother. And I will not stand for that."

My sons grab my hands, following me as we exit the school.

"Sweetheart," Duke calls after me. "We could have at least heard what he had to say."

I shake my head, my heart aching for my sons. "No, you were right, public school is not right for our sons. We'll put them in private school like you wanted."

He sighs, catching my arm, pulling me in for a hug, the boys getting squeezed in the process. "I want to punch people," I whisper low enough so the twins can't hear.

"I know, but violence isn't always the answer."

I laugh, but it's sad. "I guess."

Later that evening, as I'm outside watching the stars, a little body crawls up into my lap. I know it's Lucas, because

Silas acts like he's too old for that. Lucas lays his head on my chest, looking up at the stars with me. "I'm sorry, Momma," he whispers.

I run my hand through his dirty blond hair. "Whatever for?"

"Being weak. If I wasn't such a baby, Silas wouldn't have had to step in. Then, we wouldn't have to change schools."

"Oh." I stay quiet for a moment. "How boring the world would be if you were both alike. How horrible and ugly it would be if no one had compassion and a huge heart like yours."

It's his turn to be quiet. "You don't wish I was like Silas?"

"Of course not." I tip his little face up so I can look into his eyes. "I never want you to be anyone but who you are. You, my sweet boy, are perfect."

He smiles up at me. "I love you, Momma."

"And I, my sweet boy, love you more than the world."

He laughs. "You say the same thing to Silas."

"That's because all my love belongs to you two."

He frowns, blue eyes concerned. "What about Dad?"

I smile, looking up at the pink star. "Oh, I love him, too, but if I had to choose, it will always be you two."

He laughs, burying his head in my chest before he looks up. "Good night, Momma."

He hops off my lap and I look over my shoulder to the shadows. "You can come out, Silas. No one is out here but us."

He walks out, little hands stuffed in his pockets as he sits down by me. We stay silent, but I feel his smaller hand grab onto mine, and I smile. "I hate Andrew," he finally says.

"You're going to meet lots of Andrews in life, I'm afraid."

He sighs. "How unfortunate."

I laugh, squeezing his hand.

“Are you mad at me?”

I shake my head. “No, how can I be mad at you for sticking up for your brother?”

“Because now we have to switch schools.”

“That’s life. You’ll make new friends.”

He lays his head on my shoulder. “I heard you talking to Aunt Sienna’s star earlier. You miss her.”

I smile sadly. “I do. She was a lot like Lucas. Soft-spoken and kind. I used to call her a crybaby because she could never stick up for herself.”

“Yeah, Lucas is a crybaby too.”

“But that’s okay.”

Silas sighs. “Yeah, because I’ll always be there to protect him.”



“Are you going to come in, butterfly?”

I shake my head. To which Duke responds by picking me up and resting me in his lap as he takes a seat.

“The boys are asleep,” he says casually. “They were worn out.”

“They had an exciting day.”

He tips my chin up, searching my eyes. “Hey, what’s going on, baby?”

“I just really love you. Without you, all of this was never in the cards for me.” He smiles, kissing the corner of my mouth. “I can never repay you,” I add.

He smirks. “I can think of a few ways.”

I hit his shoulder, laughing as he stands and throws me over it.

He’s my air, my soul, my reason for breathing.

My doctor is my everything, and I can't wait to see where the rest of our lives will take us.

THE END

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

– Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Thank you for reading *Fractured Wings*.

I would love if you leave a review or rating, good or bad.

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Prologue

Elizabeth

MY SAVIOR DIDN'T COME to me riding on a horse, dressed in a suit of armor. He came in stylish ripped jeans and a plain t-shirt that cost more money than I'd ever handled with my dry, cracked hands.

His eyes were deep, like the chocolate I once ate when I was twelve. Hair as dark as the nights spent in the basement.

When his hand came toward me, I flinched. Because if there was one thing I knew, it was that monsters came in all sizes. The worst usually looked like they provided a safe haven. And this man in front of me? He looked just like that. But the sting never came. Instead, he freed me with a simple snap of his wrist.

And when he brought me to his home, he whispered a promise I knew he could never keep.

"I'll never let anything hurt you ever again."

Chapter 31

Elizabeth

WATER DROPLETS DRIP down my face as I stare at the unrecognizable woman in the mirror. It has been years since I've seen myself. Years since I've been this clean. I have been transferred from cage to cage for the majority of the last two years. I unwrap the towel from my body, seeing my malnourished figure. Rib and hip bones surrounded by sunken skin. My eyes are sunken too, surrounded by dark circles. I look like a zombie, much older than anyone of the age of twenty should look. You can see the years of war I have been through on my face, etched into my body. The battle scars on my back and the few on my thighs. There is a light ring of bruises around my neck from the collar they put on me, indication that they were not gentle.

The door rattles from the fist that bangs on it, causing me to drop to my knees and pull the towel around me. My eyes squeeze shut, and I begin to let my mind drift to my favorite place.

“Elizabeth?”

I let out a sigh of relief at the voice. *My knight*. He makes the visions slowly fade as I come back to reality. I'm not in a cage anymore, I'm... well, I'm not sure. But I'm not *there*.

“Are you okay?”

Instead of answering, I pick myself up off the floor and walk to the door, peeking outside of it. I don't speak much. Never have. When no one listens or hears your pleas, the notion holds no significance.

My neck bends back as my eyes travel up and up, landing on chocolate eyes so deep, you could get lost in them.

Noah looks concerned, but he quickly wipes it away with a smile. A dimple popping out on his left cheek. “Feel better?”

I nod, looking to the ground.

Gently, the door opens farther, cool air assaulting my wet skin. Noah jerks his head for me to follow. So, I do, cautious as to not trip or make any noises to enrage him.

“I had my assistant run out and get you some things— clothes and shit girls need. Not quite sure what that is. So, if you need anything else, just let me know, okay?”

He opens a door across from the bathroom, the light grays and fresh whites making me pause. The room is light and freeing. Some may associate the color gray with cells, but I associate it with doves. And doves remind me of peace and freedom.

My mouth slightly parts, a breath of air rushing past my lips. I look from my peripheral, seeing Noah’s tight, rigid body. As if he’s nervous. He blows out a breath, scratching the back of his head. “I know it’s plain, but we can decorate it however you like.”

“It’s perfect,” I whisper.

His eyes widen slightly at my voice. He swallows, a small smile playing on his full lips. “Okay. Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

I snap my eyes back to the room as he slowly walks away. I take a small step inside, admiring the change of textures against my feet. From the cool wood to the soft, cushiony carpet. I squish my toes into the soft material, something close to a smile making my lips twitch. I miss this feeling; the only carpet I’ve ever felt lately has been hard, caked in dirt and rough with stains. I walk back a little, my hand catching the edge of the door as I gently shut it.

The bed is low, a modern look, maybe? I don’t know. I’ve seen many beds, but I haven’t slept on one that wasn’t stained and laid upon the floor since *him*. The light gray duvet is fluffy like a giant cloud, the sheets are so white I’m worried that if I

touch them, I'll ruin them. Someone like me doesn't deserve something so soft and clean.

I do a tiny spin, taking in the dove grays of the furniture, the TV mounted on the wall across from the bed. It sits high on the wall, making me wonder if it would give me a crick in my neck to watch it from the bed. But I wouldn't care. The number of times I've been allowed to watch TV in my life, I can count on one hand. So, to even have a TV is a small blessing.

I walk to the white painted door, pulling it back slightly to reveal a closet full of clothes and shoes. Of every color and design. Even heels with red painted on the soles. My lips purse. Why would someone do that? You can barely even see the bottom, what's the point?

I take a step back, letting the towel fall to the floor as I approach the dresser, pulling open the top drawer to find panties and bras. My brow furrows. Why are they so... fancy? Sighing, I pull a light blue set out. They match. I snort a little when I think of such fine material adorning my body. It's a waste. He'll see that soon.

I slip them on, grabbing a pair of sweatpants and a baggy shirt. I don't feel the need to look nice in clothes I don't deserve and will only highlight the deteriorated shape of my body. I grab a brush, looking over the bottles next to it, but I can't read the labels. I can't read at all. The last time I was in school was in first grade, and that was before Mom decided to get on one of her manic trips, and up and move out to the middle of nowhere. She said she would homeschool me, but she never did.

I squeeze the brush handle in my hand until it shakes with the force, and then I drop it back with a sigh. I don't even know how to brush my hair. All I know how to do is...

I lay on the bed, allowing the quiet and calm to wash over me.

I have a secret. It's disturbing, even I know this. But my happy place I drift to, it's a heavenly nightmare. It's the only time I've been treated decently, but it's also where the scars

come from. So, my eyes drift shut, finding cold, black eyes and light specks of honey.

I seek *him*.



SOMETHING IS TAPPING MY NOSE. IT SMELLS OF ROSES AND brings a light brighter than the rays flowing through the window. “Elizabeth.”

“Find your happy place, Callum.” I groan. I was sleeping better than I have in years.

“Wake up.” She snaps her fingers.

My eyes flash open, taking in the unfamiliar room around me. Callum, who is not covered in dirt, is looking down at me, eyes sparkling but, also, there is the small glitter of sadness. She’s wearing light pink lipstick, a burnt orange bow in her hair to match her plaid skirt, and a cashmere beige sweater. Her brow wrinkles. “Are you okay?”

Reality crashes back into me. Chocolate eyes. The plane. My savior.

I nod, slowly.

Callum smiles. “Great, let’s get you up and ready, shall we?”

I raise my eyebrows in question.

She sighs, pulling the cover back and exposing me to the cool temperature of the room. “I’m taking you to the doctor.” I flinch. She narrows her eyes. “We have to make sure you are okay, don’t look at me like that.” She pulls me up to a sitting position. I watch as she walks into the closet, coming back with a pair of soft-looking leggings and a huge sweater the color of my bra.

“Then, we are going to get our hair done. Nails, facials, all the things.”

When Callum and I were in the cell together, I don't remember her being this demanding. Granted, we were in a dark, isolated hole of hell and could barely stay conscious due to the lack of water or food.

"Get dressed." She crosses her arms over her small frame, looking at me expectantly. And I do as she said, because if it wasn't for her, I would still be in that hell, rotting. She didn't have to demand her family to save me, but she did.

I sigh, grabbing the clothes and changing quickly as she walks around the room, face disturbed by the lack of color and personality. Callum quickly bounces over to me with thick wool socks and boots I think are meant to look like hiking boots, but they have diamonds on them. Weird. And then she puts them on me. I tilt my head, glaring down at her.

She smiles up at me, shrugging. "Now, go brush your teeth and hair."

My glare transforms to an embarrassed frown. Callum pauses, rising slowly. "You know what? Just go brush your teeth. I'll handle your hair, okay?" I nod, looking away from her. "You have nothing to be ashamed of," she says softly.

After I brush my teeth and Callum wrangles my light brown hair, we leave my room and enter the living room. I stop short at the man I've only seen once. He has dark hair and ashy eyes. He looks older, late twenties, maybe early thirties. His jaw is set in a hard line under light stubble. An unimpressed look to him, which I believe never leaves.

Callum sighs. "Lincoln, I told you I was going alone."

He smirks, eyes darkening. "Yeah, right, Doll Face."

There is so much love and affection between the two it practically glows between them. I look away. Not wanting to taint their moment. But my eyes connect with his. My knight. Sharp cheekbones cut from stone, as if he was sculpted to perfection by the gods themselves. He holds this beautiful, dark look to him. Black hair, messy and hanging in front of his face. Body lean and tone, clean of blemishes or any art. His nose is strong, royal like as if he were blessed with nobility.

He stands tall, towering over everyone in the room. Full lips, pulled down in an intense expression, hiding his single dimple. His eyes are like melted chocolate, dark and vibrant at the same time.

He is just... beautiful. I've never seen anything like him before.

My eyes fall to his simple black t-shirt, stretching over taut muscles, the light-washed, ripped jeans, and black sneakers. They say Air on them with a swoosh-looking sign. My eyes snap back to his to find him still watching me. It has a slight uncomfortable twine wrapping around me and squeezing. I avert my eyes, hoping I haven't enraged him by looking at him instead of the floor.

I hear Callum arguing with the man she calls Lincoln. Her voice is rising but then it cuts off, followed by a moan.

"For fuck's sake. Are we going or not?" Noah's deep voice rumbles across the room.

"Yes, of course. But as I was telling Lincoln, we do not need assistance. We can handle ourselves."

Noah narrows his eyes. "That's the argument you're going with? Really? After everything?"

Callum nibbles on her bottom lip, sighing. She knows she's lost this fight. Because not long ago we were both trapped in a dirty cell. "Fine, but stay out of our way."



MY LIFE TOOK A TURN FOR THE WORSE WHEN I WAS TWELVE. Mom had started using needles to put some kind of substance into her veins. I would often find her choking on her own vomit. I had to roll her over, stick my fingers down her throat, and make her puke it all back up. As bad as that sounds, that's not what altered everything.

Mom is mumbling to herself, throwing a somewhat pretty dress at me and telling me to put it on. I do. I don't want to make her angry, so I usually do as she says, no matter what.

She is smiling as we drive in the beat-up Honda. So, silly me, I think it's going to be a good day.

The thing about illusions, they are always a little too pretty to be real.

We pull up to this home. It is surrounded by rolling green hills, a fancy gate and winding roads. It stands tall, white brick with large pillars. When the door opens, a nice-looking man with honey blond hair and dark eyes greets us. His smile is kind, but the way his eyes drag over my body makes me cross my arms over my chest, shrinking back a little.

My head clears as I hear the snap of gloves. “Okay, Elizabeth, everything looks fine, but I have to run some tests, just in case...” she trails off, rolling her chair closer to me. “I want you to go get some blood work done as well after this.” She smiles, and I try to muster one back, but I can’t. This woman was just all up inside me.

My eyes fall away as the doctor talks to Callum quietly.

Finally, I’m able to get dressed and leave the room. We walk over to the labs, and I give far more blood than I believe I should have, but what do I know?

By the time we wrap all of this up, Callum asks if I want lunch. “I do, but I don’t want to eat in front of anyone.”

Callum frowns. “Not even me?”

I shake my head.

Callum nods, her mind working something out. “I think I can figure something out,” she muses.

After lunch, we walk into a salon. There is a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. A small waterfall behind the reception desk, and the entire place is in white marble. “Yes, appointment for Callum Madison.”

The lady smiles at Callum, but her eyes widen when she sees me. Because she can tell I don’t belong here, even if Callum can’t.

The lady’s smile grows wary. “Ah, yes, right this way.”

Callum grabs my hand, squeezing it. “You’re going to love Pierre. He’s amazing.”

I try to smile, but can’t find it in me. This is all too new, too soon.



MY EYES WIDEN AS I TAKE IN MY NEW HAIR. THE ONCE LONG strands are cut and lay just below my shoulders. The light brown is mixed with brown lowlights. I look younger—more my age—my eyebrows trimmed and arched, face clean and smooth, glowing. There is a hint of the ever-present dark circles under my eyes, but they are definitely a lot better now.

“Wow,” I whisper.

“Pierre does magic,” Pierre says, making my lips hitch. He always talks about himself in third person, I see. “You only let Pierre do your hair, yes?”

I nod, a smile finally breaking through. “Yes.”

“Good.”

Noah appears in the mirror behind me, eyes dilating slightly as he takes me in. I lick my lips, dipping my head to hide the small blush that reaches my cheeks from his attention.

“You cover bill,” Pierre says, snatching Noah’s card from his fingers.

“Do you like it?” His low voice falls over me, causing small pricks on my skin.

I look up, our eyes clashing in the mirror. I nod.

“Yeah, me too,” he says lowly.

He clears his throat, looking away. “Callum had to go handle some things, but she left me with strict instructions to take you to the art store. She mentioned you’re an artist?”

I nod again, my throat tight and unwilling to answer him.

He nods. “Cool.” There is an awkward pause before he asks, “Do you not talk or do you just not talk to me?”

I swallow. “I talk, I just don’t like to.”

“Well, you should. You have a beautiful voice.”

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First, I would like to thank my husband. He really is amazing and supportive in every aspect of my life. But that is a given. I specifically would like to thank him for his role in this book. He bought me a ginormous whiteboard so I could write out every symptom, medication, and treatment for the mental illness I focused on in this story. He hung the massive board up, took it down so I could sit on the floor and write my notes out—color-coded, might I add—and then he hung that bad boy up again. If you see him walking around with hunky arms, you can thank yours truly. This man listened to me as I told him detail after detail and watched documentaries with me. He even let me tell him all about my research. And even after all of that, he answered my morbid questions.

“Do you think the inside of a stomach looks like cauliflower?”

“Cauliflower? No. More like sausage links.” And he said this with a straight face.

What a man.

I would like to point out two very important people, Kelsey and Sarah. They are the bestest of friends a girl like me could ask for. They also answer my weird questions, even if they have no clue what they are pertaining to. They break up my very and surprisingly normal life. Kelsey treats me like a little princess. I can say she is 100% amazing. Sarah is the mom I didn't ask for but got anyways. She reminds me of a porcupine, honestly. I truly love them so much.

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LITERARY PR. The best PR company ever. The way they organize my life is amazing. I couldn't ask for a better team to take care of my book babies.

Last but not least, my fractured-winged soul. I've been there, standing with cold numbness in my eyes as I bargained with myself if life was worth it. If this medication was even working. What's the point if I'm going to die anyways, why suffer?

Here is why. You may feel as if it will never be better, but it can. I know you're tired, but you can't quit fighting for the life you want, for yourself. I know it's hard, love. I want you to think about this...

When I was 16, I almost lost the battle, but something stopped me. And a few months later, I met the love of my life, my husband. He gave me two beautiful children. And I was able to rekindle relationships I would have hated to miss out on. I met amazing people and learned to love myself.

I saw the fluttering kicks of my daughter in my stomach on a monitor, heard her first cry as she was laid on my chest, her tiny eyes searching mine. The first true smile was all for me. I cried and cheered as she said her first word and took her first steps. I cried again on her first day of school, but I have never felt a love like that between a mother and child. And I almost missed it... Then having my son gave me the joy of experiencing it all over again.

My point is, I almost gave up at the finish line. I almost missed all of this. I almost didn't get to sit here today and tell you, YOU ARE WORTH IT.

Life is worth it.

The fight is worth it.

Your demons, however, are not.

Your fractured wings are beautiful, and you will fly again.

XOXO, MT

About the Author



MT lives in Texas with her husband and two children. She enjoys reading a good fantasy/PNR romance as well as a good cup of coffee. She has old lady tendencies even though she's in her late-twenties. And writing her own bio is very cringe worthy to her.

M.T. Morgan tends to bounce around the romance genre. She may make you laugh, cry and cringe. It just depends on her mood.

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